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DIME NOVELS



LITTLE THUNDERBOLT.

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98 William Street, New York.

LITTLE THUNDERBOLT;

OR,

THE RANGERS OF THE CAROLINAS.

A TALE OF THE SKINNERS AND COWBOYS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

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LITTLE THE ADVENTURE;

OR

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LITTLE THUNDERBOLT.

CHAPTER I.

THE DOUBLE AMBUSCADE.

A SQUIRREL scales the rough-barked tree with almost lightning rapidity, then perches upon a lofty limb, chattering shrilly, doubly valiant since his hasty flight. The discordant voice of the blue-jay rises in quickened cadence as it flits erratically through the shrubbery. The quick, peculiar *skir* of a pheasant's wings in full flight added to the chorus, all telling of the presence of man in that seemingly unbroken wilderness.

A vine-wreathed bush trembles faintly, then sways aside, a crouching figure entering the narrow belt of open ground. As the squirrel, the jay-bird and the pheasant had indicated, this figure was of the human race, though of what division was not easy to guess, as it crouched low down over the sward.

His dress of rudely tanned skins was ragged and dingy; long locks of tangled black hair fell over and around his face, from beneath the stained strip of doe-skin that encircled his temples. Ill-shaped, bony fingers were moving restlessly over the green sward, now lifting a blade of grass, now turning over a discolored leaf.

Scarce a score of moments were spent thus, when, with a low exclamation, the man lifted his form erect, and placing one hand to his lips, gave vent to a short, peculiar whistle, broken abruptly by a quaver. Then leaning upon the muzzle of his long rifle, his gaze once more sought the ground, burning with a steady glow that, added to the firmly-compressed lips, told of some significant discovery.

It could be seen that he was a white man, though the deeply sunburned and tanned skin would not have disgraced an Indian. His actions, his very air, proclaimed him a scout.

Such indeed he was, and no ordinary one, since local history has recorded his name and services upon its pages in letters that shall never die.

The signal—for such it evidently was—speedily brought an answer in kind; then again the bushes parted, and a second figure appeared. Standing side by side, there was an almost ludicrous contrast between the two scouts.

The first—Steve Larrabee—was small, almost diminutive, though perfectly proportioned. In that round, compact body, steel-like limbs, was hidden a world of strength and activity, added to almost marvelous skill and address.

The Cherokees had epitomized these qualities in the name they had bestowed upon him; translated it signified, **LITTLE THUNDERBOLT**.

The second comer was almost a giant in size, yet moving with that marvelous lightness which often surprises one in large men.

“What is it, Steve?” he uttered, in a shrill treble, contrasting laughably with his huge build.

“See!”

“Ouph! Injuns—fresh, too. That means deviltry, Steve,” muttered the giant.

“Mebbe not; but they won’t ketch us sleepin’. Drop back an’ post the boys. Ef the imps mean mischief, it’ll come at the bluff, yender. Send Crocker back to tell the cap’n.”

Steve Larrabee said no more, but turned and crossed the narrow belt of open ground, his every sense upon the keen alert. Perfectly versed in the lay of the ground surrounding his position, he knew exactly where to look for trouble, should his surmises prove correct.

Ten minutes of rapid advance brought him in sight of the bluff alluded to. Crouching down beside a tree-trunk, sheltered from the view of any foeman upon the hillside by a scrubby bush before him, his black, bead-like eyes roved keenly over the suspected ground. As he had said, here, if at all, would come the attack.

The hill seemed cleft asunder, though in reality there were two, separated by some two-score yards of comparatively level ground. One-third of this space was occupied by a shallow creek, flowing gently along, curving abruptly around the base

of the western hill, its banks growing more contracted and higher as it left the defile.

The trim slopes were irregular, studded thickly with various-sized boulders, around which grew scrubby, vine-wreathed bushes, affording ample cover for an enemy, should such an one be stationed there. Securely sheltered, they could rain down death upon those passing through the narrow defile, with little fear from a return fire.

Little wonder then that Steve bent his every faculty toward this spot. Shrub by shrub, rock by rock, he was scanning the suspected ambush, little dreaming of the peril that was even then stealing upon him from the rear.

Cautiously, silently as the treacherous moccasin, a dusky warrior was slowly writhing his way out of a densely-matted clump of shrubbery, growing only a few yards to the right of the trail made by Little Thunderbolt, not a score of yards to the rear of where he was now crouching. The face was unmistakably that of an Indian, now rendered doubly ferocious by the fantastic mask of paint and the vindictive glitter of the black eyes.

Between his teeth was clenched the bare blade of a stout knife; his hands nervously clutched a small coil of tough, rawhide rope. This, added to his stealthy approach, proclaimed his purpose; he meant to capture the white scout, not slay him.

Another shrub, growing directly in line, concealed him from his intended victim, in case the latter should glance around, and pausing beneath this, the savage glanced anxiously toward the creek, at the same time assuring himself that the coil was not foul. As he looked, a bunch of half-dried grass slowly moved away from the creek-bank, though but a moment before half its height had been hidden behind the escarpment.

From his position the Indian with the noosed rope could distinguish the lower limbs of a human being, stretched along the ground. From where Little Thunderbolt knelt, nothing was visible but the bunch of grass.

Noiseless in his progress as that of a shadow cast by a cloud sweeping athwart the face of the sun, the savage bearing the noosed rope neared the spot where his prey still

crouched. Then he paused again and awaited the approach of his ally.

As yet Steve Larrabee was ignorant of this peril. His gaze still roved keenly over the hillside, seeking for some trace of the enemy he felt was ambushed there. And inch by inch the bunch of grass was nearing him; the eyes of the savage already at his station burned and glittered with a still more deadly light.

A low, quavering trill came soaring to the scout's ear, from the forest beyond. Steve recognized this, and hastily turned his head. It was the signal from his comrades, asking if all was well.

The half-shaped answer died away upon the scout's lips, and a strange light filled his eyes. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, one hand glided toward the lock of his rifle. An apparently trivial circumstance had aroused his suspicions.

His gaze rested upon a bunch of grass, withered and dead. Almost any other eye than his would have passed this by without a second thought. There was nothing strange in a bunch of grass growing beside a bush, and although he had not observed it in passing by, that might easily have happened, as his attention was mainly turned toward the hills.

What Little Thunderbolt saw was this: around the bunch near its middle, was passed what looked like a band, scarcely larger than some of the blades themselves. But they were dead, while this was *green*. And as he looked, Steve saw that the end of the band had been freshly cut, the sunlight glittering upon the sap-stained bark.

It was in such apparently insignificant circumstances that Steve Larrabee had especially trained himself. Much of his reputation had been made by noting facts of seemingly trivial importance, often proving the clew to his search, after others less observant had failed.

As Steve gazed piercingly at this, a faint chirp broke the air, like that of a cricket, and then the bunch of grass perceptibly vibrated, quivering as though touched by a passing breath of wind. This confirmed Little Thunderbolt's suspicions. A feathery plume upheld would have been motionless as though carved from stone.

What followed was quick as thought; too rapid for the

eye to follow each motion. Little Thunderbolt seemed to throw forward his rifle and fire with a single motion. A shrill yell mingled with the report, and the bunch of grass uprose from the ground, then falling in a feathery shower, revealing a painted face, now horribly distorted with death-agony.

The tall figure staggered backward, turned as if to flee, then plunged heavily to the ground, tearing convulsively at the moist earth and decaying leaves upon the verge of the creek-bank.

There were other changes, no less rapid. The savage first noted sprung erect, whirling the rawhide noose above his head. True to its aim, the coil settled over the scout's shoulders, and then a powerful jerk hurled him heavily to the ground from which he had just arisen.

Yelling in shrill triumph the Indian leaped forward, his exultant peal being answered back by a score of throats upon the hillside, every bush and rock seeming to vomit forth an armed and painted foeman. But this ambush had been sprung prematurely, by the keen-sighted scout.

Little Thunderbolt gave additional evidence of his wondrous quickness. Scarcely had his body touched the ground, than his knife flashed upon the air, and then its keen blade severed the tough rope at one slash.

Quick as had been the movements of the Indian, he had not taken his second leap ere the scout was erect, confronting him with ready knife. Slashing the noose from his body, Steve uttered his shrill war-cry.

But the combat that seemed inevitable was not to take place. A spiteful crack rung out from along the back trail made by Larrabee, and the baffled red-skin sunk in his tracks, a quivering heap, his death-yell dying away in a hoarse gurgle.

All this had passed like magic. The report of Steve's rifle had scarcely died away, ere the second death had taken place. And again did the war-cry of Little Thunderbolt ring forth, followed by the words:

"Let the imps have it, boys—then tree!"

An irregular volley was the response; five rifles spoke, and each bullet found its mark upon one of the painted reptiles

that the hillside had given forth. Like enchantment, the survivors disappeared, even as they had sprung into view; only the dead or dying were left unhidden.

At the same time Little Thunderbolt had sprung to cover, and now found himself with his brother scouts; all except the giant, Corney Voss. Each man closely hugging the bole of a tree, was rapidly reloading his rifle, wondering why a rush was not made by the enemy, so greatly their superiors in point of numbers.

"Work lively, boys," muttered Larrabee; "the imps 're comin'. Lis'en to the signals."

"Ef the cap'n was to come up now, we'd bag the hull kit," muttered one of the scouts.

"Corney's with 'em. He knows what to— Hold! thar, Ben—he's *my* meat!"

For the second time that day did Little Thunderbolt's rifle sound the death-knell of a foeman. As yet none of the Indians had exposed themselves openly, but they were at the last cover, gathering concert for an open rush. The scouts knew this, and though outnumbered eight to one, they did not flinch, though every ear seemed strained to catch the approach of their comrades. The forest seemed deserted in that direction.

A single clear, loud yell—then, as one man, the painted demons rushed out into the level ground, in a stern, deadly charge. At the same moment a giant figure sprung beside Little Thunderbolt, his rifle speaking with those of the others; then he uttered a few hasty words in the scout's ear.

"Fall back, boys!" cried Steve Larrabee. "Keep kivered the best you kin, but fall back 'long the trail."

A moment later and it must have come to a hand-to-hand combat, but like shadowy phantoms the rangers darted to the rear, as hasty volleys from the enemy cut the air viciously around them, more than once penetrating human flesh, though only one of the scouts dropped to the ground. Two seconds later and his scalp was brandished on high by the foremost savage.

A cry broke from the lips of Little Thunderbolt as he observed the end of the ill-fated scout—a cry shrill and piercing,

full of a horrible anger, of lust for vengeance upon the red-handed foe.

He forgot his own peril, forgot all else save that his friend lay there still gasping in his death-agony, and dropping the useless rifle, clutching knife and tomahawk, he turned upon the savage foe. His eyes glittered with a lurid light, his features were frightfully convulsed.

The exultant yell of the savage abruptly died away, and even in the flush of glory that he had been the first to strike the hated pale-faces, he shrunk back upon his comrades. For a moment the mad rush of a single man held in check full two score savages. But that man was Little Thunderbolt.

Two cat-like bounds carried Steve Larrabee to the side of his prey, so brief was the interval between pursued and pursuers. Never before had he so truly merited his *sobriquet*. The mutilation, the turning, the onset and the avenging blow were as one action.

Before a hand could be uplifted to interfere, the scout was avenged. Two strokes; the heavy hatchet crashed down through the plume-bedecked crest, sinking past the very edge, while the long-bladed knife was buried to the very haft in the red-skin's brawny chest, cleaving his heart in twain.

Again pealed forth Little Thunderbolt's shrill war-cry, as he wrenched his weapons free. Then the foemen sprung upon him as one man, bearing him to the ground like a blade of grass. Yet, brief as had been this struggle, more than one of the savages bore deep and deadly marks that testified loudly to the almost supernatural quickness of the scout.

"Back, boys!" yelled the giant, Corney Voss. "Steve is down—the cap'n's here. Whooray! Gi' the pesky varmints ge-lory!"

The giant scout sprung into the thickest of the fray, his heavy rifle sweeping a broad swath before him. Right yeomanly did the other scouts second him, but bravely, desperately as they fought, their end must have come soon only for the opportune arrival of reinforcements.

A ringing cheer filled the air, as over a score of rangers burst forth from the woods, advancing at a run. Though bearing rifles, they did not fire, lest, through the rapid changes, friends, not enemies, might receive the volley.

Both parties staggered as the shock came, then mingled together in what seemed inextricable confusion. Then was truly a carnival of death.

Man grappled with man, only seeking the death of his immediate antagonist, scarce guarding against the thickly-falling blows, unheeding that his own life-blood was falling like water, in the ferocity of his hatred. It was the warring of demons, not that of men.

Though brief, the conflict was deadly in the extreme. The forces were nearly equal now in point of numbers, the rangers being carefully picked men for particularly desperate duty, and even during that frightful ten minutes, more than one felt surprise that the savages should have so desperately contended for the mastery. It was foreign to Indian nature.

Then a single, shrill yell arose; as by one accord, each painted warrior broke away and fled through the forest toward the defile. After them, with loud cheers of victory, sped such of the rangers as could do so, among them Little Thunderbolt, though his every step was marked with blood.

One, a tall, nobly-formed man, wearing the uniform of a captain in the American army, raised a call to his lips and sounded a peculiar blast; then turned his gaze upon the dead-strewn battle-field. Despite his strong nerves, a shudder agitated his frame, and a look of painful regret filled his eyes.

Among the dead bodies he could recognize more than one dear friend and neighbor. The blow had fallen heavily upon his command. Nine forms wearing the ranger's costume lay there, stark and still, surrounded by twice that number of paint-bedaubed savages.

Slowly the pursuers returned, and all empty handed. Four bleeding, scowling prisoners came with them, awed into non-resistance by the ready blood-stained weapons that threatened them.

"A sad day's work, Steve," muttered the captain to Little Thunderbolt, as that worthy finished binding his captive. "Nine brave boys gone to their account! Had you not been so rash, half this would have been spared us."

"How d' you make that out, Cap'n Clarke?"

"I sent Voss to draw them into *our* ambushade, but you

rushed back so that we could make no use of our rifles. They would never have stood more than one volley at such close quarters."

"I couldn't help it, cap'n. They rubbed out pore Gid—Gid Hughes—an' a imp took his ha'r. Was I to look on *that* an' do nothin'? An' he my pardner fer so long? It 'd make a man forgit his parunts—you cain't blame me ef you look at it fa'r an' squar', cap'n," gloomily responded Larrabee.

"You are bad hurt, Steve. Best look to them at once, for we must not dally long in this neighborhood. Those reptiles will gather more of their kind and be after revenge."

"Scratches—nothin' more. But I'll wash 'em off, I reckon."

A minute later a shrill cry came from the creek where Steve had disappeared, and then as all eyes were turned in that direction he was observed dragging the body of an Indian after him, by a foot, his face wearing a curious expression.

"What now, Larrabee?" demanded the officer.

"Look for yourself!" and Steve, stooping, held up the dead man's head to view.

It was the same man he had shot while disguised with the bunch of grass, as narrated. In his death-struggles the savage had fallen into the water, and now his partially-cleansed face was seen to be that of a *white man*—deeply sun-em-browned, but unmistakably that of a pale-face.

An angry cry burst from the lips of more than one of the rangers, and as their fiery glances were turned toward the prisoners in suspicion, three of them shrunk back, trembling and terrified. But not so the fourth. His black eyes returned look for look, bold and defiant.

"A white man! Do you recognize him, Steve?" said Captain Clarke.

"I thought so, but I ain't sure. Step here, Conway. You'll know, if it's the one I think."

The scout addressed advanced, and stooping gazed long and keenly upon the features of the dead man. When he arose, a strange light filled his eyes. His strongly-marked features were convulsed, and one hand sought his throat as though he was choking.

"Do you know him?" asked the officer.

"Yes—I ort to!" was the slow reply. "It's Dave Carnick!"

"Jest as I thought. One o' Bud Anson's gang o' Cowboys!" cried Little Thunderbolt.

A hoarse cry arose from the body of rangers, and a rush was made toward the prisoners.

Captain Clarke and Larrabee sprung between them.

CHAPTER II.

SUMMARY JUSTICE.

"HOLD! men, what would you do?" cried the captain, pressing back the foremost.

"Kill the cussed white red-skins!" snarled one of the rangers, his eyes blazing like living coals of fire. "You forgit our oath!"

"No—'tis you who forget. Back, I say. You shall not murder these prisoners," sternly added the officer, his sword flashing from its scabbard.

"Easy, boys," quoth Little Thunderbolt, quietly, yet with a quietness that even more than louder bluster, proved his earnestness. "Ef you run afoul a snag, *somebody* must git hurt, an' 'tain't likely it 'd be the *snag*, nuther. You know Cap'n Clarke, an' you'd orter know *me*, too."

"Larrabee says well, my men, and now hear me. You, Tom Canton, say I forget my oath, taken with the rest of you. I have not. That oath was never to spare the life of a Cowboy—more especially that of a member of Anson's gang of cut-throats. Up to this day have I ever failed?"

"No—but *he* is one of 'em," muttered Canton, nodding toward the corpse.

"True, and he has met his reward. I know what you mean. These, his comrades, may be of those included in our oath; very probably they are. But, first, we will make sure.

If not, they are only prisoners. If yes—then I leave them to you, to deal with as you think best.”

“Sound as ever, Cap’n Al,” uttered Little Thunderbolt. “I’ll find out the real color o’ these birds fer you, in a minnit. Ketch holt, boys. Take ’em to the drink.”

As strong hands seized upon the four prisoners, three of them shrunk tremblingly back, abject terror written upon every feature. The fourth, on the contrary, met the gaze of Steve Larrabee unflinchingly, a mock light in his full bright eyes, a sneer curling his lip.

Little Thunderbolt paused, his eyes filling with a strange light, his breath coming hard and quick. The captive uttered a low, scornful laugh. Evidently he was made of sterner stuff than were his companions in misfortune.

“What do you intend doing, Steve?”

“Nothin’—only to scrub some o’ this ’ere paint an’ grease off. Wait, cap’n. Ef I don’t mistake I’ve got a prize here as ’ll make you feel like singing ge-lory for a week!”

The gaze of Captain Clarke and the prisoner met, and in the look of the latter was a deadly malignancy that told of intense hatred. But the officer seemed not to recognize the features, covered as they were with paint, as well as half-dried blood that still trickled from a scalp-wound.

“I don’t think I know him; but hasten, Steve. If it is as you suspect, then there’s no time to lose.”

Little Thunderbolt’s scrubbing process, though not the most gentle imaginable, was at least thorough. The prisoners were dragged down to the creek bed, and there handfuls of wet sand applied to the painted skin. It was a novel scene, and Larrabee’s jovial laugh soon spread itself among the rangers, until all were in high glee over the tortures of the writhing captives.

Little Thunderbolt’s suspicions were quickly verified. The four men, divested of their paint masks, proved to be white. One at least was immediately recognized for an old offender: the man who had laughed in Larrabee’s face.

“You see, Cap’n Al,” said Little Thunderbolt, as he dragged his captive back to the glade. “I didn’t guess so far out as you thought. It’s Bud Anson, exquire!”

“I see. A prize, truly. Too valuable an one not to re-

ceive the closest attention at our hands," and there was a stern, deadly resolve in the officer's tones that bade the prisoner hope for little mercy at his hands.

"Bah ! are you afraid to speak out plain, even when I am bound hand and foot—wounded in the bargain ?" sneered the man called Bud Anson.

" *You* should know whether I am a coward or no. But as matters stand, you had far better be thinking of what is before you, and preparing yourself for the change, while yet you have time."

" We are prisoners of war—you dare not murder us."

" I dare more than you give me credit for, perhaps. But you can not shelter yourself under that plea. You are a traitor to your people and your country—a renegade and a cowardly midnight murderer. You will die, as you have lived, the death of a dog. As for these men, they shall have a trial. If they are of your band, they shall follow your lead into eternity. You understand ?"

Anson did not reply, save by cursing furiously at his comrades, who were begging piteously for mercy. Captain Clarke turned to Little Thunderbolt, saying :

" We will march on to the Dead Pine hollow. There's good water there, and little danger that the friends of these gentlemen will molest us. Do you and Van lead the way. I'll see to it that our kind friends here do not give us the slip."

The term "Cowboys"—so called, probably, from their well-known affection for that useful animal—is one that requires little explanation. It, together with that of "Skinners," found birth in, as it died out with, the border feuds between neighbors of different political belief. In time, a distinct order—or rather, two distinct orders—of the same community was formed, whose sole occupation appears to have been relieving their fellow-citizens of any little excess of temporal prosperity they might be thought to enjoy, under the pretense of patriotism or love of the king, as the case might be.

The Cowboys were recruited from among the Tories ; the Skinners from among those of opposite feeling, yet they were consistent in only one feeling : that of hatred toward each other. All was fish that came to their net. Friend or enemy, it mattered little.

Bud Anson commanded one of these gangs of Cowboys, and by many a ruthless deed had brought down upon him and his the bitter enmity of Clarke's Rangers, who had sworn the death-hunt against them. This much to explain what has gone before and is yet to follow.

Captain Allan Clarke strode along beside the captive Anson, his face still and expressionless, but with a stern light filling his eyes. The Cowboy chief cast an occasional glance toward the officer, but evidently derived but little assurance from them. He saw that his doom was sealed beyond a doubt, unless he could effect an escape before Dead Pine Hollow was reached.

Escape? The Tory smiled bitterly at the thought, as his keen eye took in his surroundings. Dark and scowling glances met his gaze upon every hand. More than one brawny hand nervously fingered a weapon, as though itching to use it upon the captives.

Escape, then, was hopeless. The first move would be death. Bud Anson fully realized his peril, and yet his face did not blench, nor did the sneering smile once leave his lip.

Clarke noted these glances, and easily divined their purport. His voice rung exultantly as he spoke:

"Still dreaming of escape, Bud Anson? Better by far try to make your peace with the Master you have so long defied."

"'Tis you that dream, not I. Laugh as you may, Allan Clarke, I'll live to exult over your blackening corpse, as it dangles from some forest limb. It is so ordered. A man can not die before his time comes, nor can he go out of the world by a different death than that which is recorded against his birth. You will not hang me. My time is not yet come," coolly uttered the Cowboy.

"Bah! this is folly, Bud Anson. Your hours, nay, your very moments, are numbered. Whether fate recorded it at your birth or no, you die at our hands, the death of a murderer, by hanging, before the sunlight gives place to that of the new moon, yonder. You are already tried and condemned. Be sure that we will give you no chance for eluding your richly merited fate."

"Continue thinking that; the time will soon come when

you can judge whose words are nearest the truth. And yet, even were it to be so, I could almost die contented. I've had my revenge upon you—of that knowledge not even death can cheat me," and the voice of the Cowboy chief rung out clear and exultant, with a malignant cadence that, despite his iron will, caused a thrill of vague apprehension to creep over the frame of the American officer.

"You have sworn to kill me—I am here. Then where—in what, lies your revenge? You speak without reason," coldly returned Clarke, casting aside the ill-defined doubts that assailed his heart.

"'Tis my turn now to cry, 'Bah! fool!' Is it only through *your* life that I can strike you? No. My revenge takes a still keener shape than that. I struck at your *heart*; and my blow went home—*home*—do you understand that word?" hissed the captive Cowboy, his features aglow with a sneer of devilish triumph.

Allan Clarke started, and his bronzed features turned a shade paler as his gaze fixed upon the countenance of his prisoner. In those black orbs, so full of a deadly exultation, he read what caused his heart to throb wildly and rise chokingly to his throat.

"What do you mean?" he slowly uttered, the words shaping themselves with difficulty.

"Ha! that touches you, then? I thought as much. You see I am not so powerless as you supposed. I can crush your very heart—make it shed tears of blood—make you suffer the agony of a thousand deaths. Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Cowboy, recklessly, malignantly.

"Let me shet his mouth fer him, Cap'n Al," muttered Tom Canton, wistfully fingering his knife-hilt. "The imp spits his pizen round wuss'n a copperhead!"

"Peace, Canton," said Clarke, with an effort controlling his emotions. "His time will come soon enough. He dies when we reach Dead Pine Hollow."

"Don't be too sure of that, my friend," sneered Anson, yet in a tone as though he fully believed his words. "It is not my fate to dance on nothing for the edification of your troop. The stars have written that I am to die in my bed, a natural death, and it does not lie in your power to prove their pre-

diction false. See—we are not two miles from the spot you have designated as that where I shall be executed. In half an hour from this I will be a free man, whether you believe it or no.”

“You will—free from all mortal power. You will be dead.”

“Not so. I tell you again that I will live to see *you* dead. I will be *free* in that time—free by your own action and command despite the oath you have taken.”

“You talk like a fool. I will listen to no more,” was the cold reply.

“You will listen, and as a reward for what I am about to tell you, you will cut my bonds and bid me depart, free as air.”

Allan Clarke laughed contemptuously.

“You think me crazy? Listen—then say if I am talking at random. If I die this night, as you threaten, there will be two more souls dispatched to keep me company; those of two women—of your mother and your sister.”

Captain Clarke started convulsively, his features strongly agitated, his eyes filled with a look of horror. But then his hand dropped from the sword-hilt, and a mocking smile took its place upon his lips. In a tone of contempt he replied:

“Bah! I was a fool for noticing you. You are braver than I gave you credit for being, Bud Anson, but you can not taunt me into robbing the halter of its own.”

“Nor do I wish to. Life is not so burdensome as that comes to, yet. I have work to accomplish before making my final exit. I tell you plainly and candidly, that upon my life hinges that of your mother and of your sister. You are very dull of comprehension, my dear fellow, or you would understand me without so many words. They are both, then, at our rendezvous, held captive by my orders. If I do not return at the end of a certain time, they die. Do you understand me *now*?”

“I hear your words, but I believe you are lying,” slowly replied Clarke.

“I am not. One week ago yesterday I called at your house with my boys. The women began to put on airs, and when I undertook to correct them, your nigger put in *his* oar.

He is really Sleepy Tom now, for I don't believe he'll wake up much before the last trump. Well, not to trifle with your feelings, I invited your folks to pay our camp a visit, and they consented—after a sort. They are there now. I don't suppose the boys would grieve very much should any thing occur to detain me beyond the time I set for my return, as, in that case, they have permission to entertain the ladies after their own peculiar style. This is the reason I feel so confident that you will give me my freedom. And now have I rendered matters sufficiently plain to your comprehension?" sneered Anson, a devilish glitter in his black eyes.

"And you expect me to believe this?" demanded Clarke, but his ashen pallor belied the confidence of his tones.

"I do—else why tell of it at all?"

"Then undeceive yourself. I believe it is all a lie, but were I fully assured of its truth, you should not escape me. Your doom is sealed; only I give you this consolation. This story of yours deserves a reward, if only for its ingenuity. You shall have it. I consign you to the mercy of Tom Canton, here. You murdered his mother; draw your inference from that thought."

"You forget—"

"I forget nothing. You hear your sentence—make the most of it."

Bud Anson relapsed into a sullen silence, though his features gave no evidence of fear. He really seemed to place implicit confidence in his boast of escaping, desperate as was his situation.

Though Captain Clarke affected to laugh at the story of the Cowboy, he was far from being at ease concerning the relatives spoken of. Though highly improbable, to say the least, he knew that such an event might possibly have taken place.

A brief retrospective glance may not be amiss at this juncture, for the better comprehension of what follows.

Before the war of the Revolution opened, the two families, those of Anson and Clarke, were close neighbors, their plantations adjoining, in fact. Though neighbors, there was little intercourse between them; instead, there was a mutual aversion that almost amounted to a *vendetta*.

An uncle of Allan's was brutally murdered one night, as he rode homeward from Charlestown. Suspicion pointed toward Harvey Anson, the father of the present Cowboy chief, and Colonel Clarke did not scruple to openly accuse him of being his brother's murderer, though in the trial that ensued Anson proved an *alibi*, mainly by his son's evidence.

The bad blood engendered by this event culminated in a duel, Harvey Anson being shot dead at the first fire, Clarke losing his left arm. Matters rested thus until the colonies threw off the mother yoke.

During a year previous to the declaration of independence, Bud—as he was generally known, though his real name was Harvey, after his father—Anson, though chillingly received, persisted in forcing his attentions upon Nina Clarke, Allan's sister. Seeing he would not take no for an answer, Nina appealed to her brother, who forbade Anson the house. Intruding again, he was ordered out, and making an insulting remark, was thoroughly horsewhipped by the irate brother.

Two weeks after this, Colonel Clarke was murdered at his very threshold, shot through the heart by a rifle-ball, it being believed that the assassin had taken him for Allan, who had recently departed on a reconnoitering expedition in his country's cause. When summoned home by this sad news, he sought for Bud Anson, but without success, though learning that that worthy had gathered together a gang of reckless characters with whom he had left the vicinity. He was soon heard from, however, as the leader of an unusually bold and ruthless gang of Cowboys, and as time passed on, his name became a terror to all peaceful citizens, both of Whig and loyal proclivities, sparing neither side in his maraudings.

Little wonder, then, that Allan Clarke, knowing all this, was ill at ease, though he strove to believe the captive was trying to effect his freedom through a plausibly-concocted lie. But there was only one course open to him. Even had he known that the lives of his kindred depended upon it, his men would have rebelled at once in case he said aught in favor of releasing the Cowboy chief.

But little more was said until the valley popularly known as Dead Pine Hollow was gained, shortly after sunset. This was a curious and somewhat dreary-looking spot, rendered all

the more gloomy, now that the shades of night were fast deepening into darkness.

A blighting hand seemed to have marked this valley for its own. Long and narrow, lying between high hills, not a bush, tree or blade of grass now lived there. All was dead and withered. Here and there uprose the tall trunks, almost branchless, of pines that looked as though scarred by the fiery tongue of lightning; all was dead.

Near the upper end of this valley the rangers halted. Here began the growth of bushes and trees, robed in native verdure. From beneath the roots of a huge, wide-spreading tree issued the clear waters of a tiny spring, at which the rangers eagerly quenched their thirst, and at a short distance from which they hastily kindled a small fire, whose rays flickered fantastically over the weird scene.

Little time was wasted in the trial of the prisoners. By common consent, Captain Clarke was appointed judge. Seated beside the spring, he listened to the various accusations.

Little Thunderbolt and Corney Voss were busily engaged in plaiting running nooses. Tom Canton was crouching beside the prostrate figure of the Cowboy chief, with ready eye upon his every motion. His eyes glared vividly at the thought that his murdered mother would soon be avenged.

"Men," said Clarke, "look at the prisoners closely. Do you recognize any of them?"

"I know this one," replied a ranger, indicating one trembling wretch. "It's George Pace."

"Raise him up. Let him lean against the tree-trunk yonder. Now, sir, look at me. Your name is George Pace?"

The craven-hearted prisoner opened his lips, but only a husky rattling sound issued. Terror had almost paralyzed him.

"Speak out, cain't you? Don't ye hear the cap'n ax ye a question?"

"Wait, Manton. You say his name is George Pace; what else do you know about him?"

"Enough to hang the cuss. He is one of the head devil's men—Bud Anson's, yender. He was at Canton's, when they killed his old woman."

"You make oath to this effect?"

"I do—a double an' twisted one, if you want," was the prompt reply.

"Enough—take him away."

Thus, one by one, the three prisoners were condemned, on the oath of some member of the rangers. Their denials were taken as naught, and through all their pleadings and ravings the judge sat there cold and unmoved as a marble statue. It was a horrible scene, but the rangers had received most fearful provocation.

"You will regret this, Allan Clarke," muttered Bud Anson, as the judge directed the ropes to be adjusted over a horizontal limb of the tree beneath which he sat. "This is murder!"

"Any more so than when you shot my father from ambush?" coldly retorted the ranger.

"A lie—I did not kill him. He was—"

"Never mind now. That is past. Whether you murdered him or not, matters little, for within ten minutes *you* die."

"You dare not—you forget what I told you. Upon my life depends the lives—the honor of your mother and your sister!"

"I do not forget. I believe you were lying. But, even were it all the truth, in what would they be bettered should we set you free? There would only be one worthless devil the more to torture them. No, Bud Anson. Give over all such thoughts. Your life is ours—your career is ended. We are doing a good deed in ridding the earth of your accursed presence."

"You dare not—I am an officer—you dare not hang me!" and for the first time since his capture, the Cowboy gave open signs of fear.

"I shall not hang you. I give you over to the man beside you. You murdered his old mother in cold blood. His is the hand to avenge her. Unless he relents, you are a dead man."

Tom Canton laughed aloud: a laugh so horrible, so full of blood-curdling malignancy that even Clarke turned aside with a shudder. Bending low down, the half-crazed ranger hissed into his victim's ear:

"You hear—you are *mine*—mine to deal with as I choose! I'll kill you—not at once, but by inches. I'll—" and here his words were audible only to the captive, who could not restrain a cry of horror.

"Make short work with them, Voss," uttered Clarke in a constrained tone. "'Tis not a pleasant sight, but our oath can not be broken."

"It don't turn *my* stomach—not much!" came the low, fierce reply. "They deserve wuss—ef I hed my way, they'd *roast*!"

"Canton, what are you going to do?" cried Clarke, his attention attracted by a cry from Anson.

"For God's sake, Clarke, save me from this devil!" gasped the Cowboy chief, pale and quaking. "Kill me, if you must, but don't give me over to him to be tortured!"

"No—no! he's mine—all mine, now," snarled Canton, drawing his long knife and crouching to the ground like a wild beast. "You shall not interfere. He's *mine*! The man dies that tries to take him from me!"

"Your word is passed, Cap'n Al," muttered Little Thunderbolt, as Clarke hesitated. "Tom is well-nigh crazy now, an' ef you tries to save Bud, he'll knife you, sure. The sarpint deserves it all—an' more too, ef he could git it."

"Plead with *him*, Bud Anson, not to me. I wash my hands of the affair," coldly returned the officer.

"Git up—you must come with me," gritted Canton, as he severed the cords that confined his captive's feet.

"Mercy—for the love of God, mercy! Not life—I don't ask that. Kill me at one blow, if you will, but not *that*—my God! not *that*!" gasped the Tory, his eyes almost bursting from their sockets.

"Did you think of mercy when my pore mother begged to you, on her knees? No—you murdered her. Good—I'll murder you—by inches! Come—must I drag you, coward?" hissed the maniac, for such indeed Canton now seemed, as he jerked Anson to his feet.

Clarke turned aside with a shudder of horror, but even had he felt so disposed, he could have done nothing. The worst passions of the rangers were now fully aroused, and he

would only have risked his own life, without availing anything.

Canton half-led, half-dragged his victim up the valley, where the dark shadows quickly hid them from sight of the rest. These, headed by the giant ranger, Corney Voss, were also busy.

Over a stout limb hung three hastily-improvised ropes, manufactured from belts, straps, and even clothing torn from the doomed victims. Pleading piteously for life, the trembling wretches were dragged beneath the fatal bough, and the nooses adjusted around their necks.

Clarke turned aside and stopped his ears, as a series of half-strangled cries broke from the swaying figures, as the strong-armed rangers swung them into eternity.

At nearly the same moment there came a strange sound from the valley near where Canton had disappeared with his prisoner. It was a long, thrilling screech, so full of the most horrible agony, that even the giant ranger trembled.

The listeners held their breath, but nothing more was heard, for several moments. Then came a loud laugh, taunting and triumphant. Their eyes instinctively turned toward each other.

Little Thunderbolt was the first to move. He clutched his rifle and sprung toward the spot from whence had proceeded the startling sounds.

Then his cry came back, and abandoning the dangling corpses, the rangers flocked to the spot. Little Thunderbolt stood beneath a huge tree, and as they gained his side, he pointed a ramrod at its base. A human figure lay there ghastly and still, covered with blood that still oozed from a frightful cut in the breast.

A single ray from the young moon pierced the leafy covert, and fell athwart the dead man's countenance. A simultaneous cry burst from the lips of the astonished rangers.

It was the corpse of their comrade, Tom Canton!

Where then was the Cowboy chief? Though all asked this question, mentally, each man answered it in the same thought. He had escaped.

"No use, Cap'n Al," muttered Little Thunderbolt, as Clarke's lips parted as though he would speak. "He's gone,

an' we cain't ketch him now. He's as good a woodsman as the best here, an' in the dark kin laugh at us, the best we kin do. Pore Tom !"

Silently and awestricken, the rangers lifted up the corpse of their dead comrade and bore it back to the spring. Then, with the gently-swaying corpses of the outlaws above them, they hollowed out a grave and hid their dead from sight of human eyes.

CHAPTER III.

THE COWBOYS AT HOME.

BENDING low down in the saddle, a horseman dashed recklessly along a faintly-defined bridle-path, winding deviously through what might almost be termed a swamp, so low and moist was the nature of the ground. A dark figure suddenly sprung out into the trail, from behind the sheltering trunk of a tree, and as his rifle fell to a level, his voice rung out clear and menacing :

"Halt !"

"Easy, Durg Mason," cried the reckless rider, abruptly checking his horse, reining in so close that the twin jets of hot breath fanned the face of the sentinel. "Spare your bullets for other than your friends, my man."

"I did not recognize you at first, captain," respectfully added the other, lowering his weapon. "And you forgot to pause at the barrier, yonder."

"I was in too great haste to think of that. But how goes matters ? Are the boys still here ? Have any come in yet that went away with me on the last trip ?"

"Three or four only. The others are here, but very anxious. The report is that you were killed. It'll be a glad day, this one, now that they see you among them once more, captain," earnestly added the man called Mason.

"Thank you, Durg. I did have a close shave—so close that my skin tingles even yet. But never mind—a miss is

as good as a mile. I'll visit the boys first. There's work for us all, to-night, if I mistake not."

Bud Anson struck his heel violently against the heaving flanks, and then dashed rapidly forward. Another minute carried him into an open glade that now bore the appearance of an encampment.

Nearly a score of men in every conceivable style of dress, were scattered around in various attitudes of careless ease. To the trees around were tethered a number of horses, upon whose backs the saddles still rested. Upon the higher ground near the center of the knoll were the embers of a smoldering fire. This glade was, in fact, the temporary rendezvous of the Cowboy gang that owned Bud Anson as their leader.

As the Tory entered the glade, he was quickly recognized, and from the manner in which he was greeted, from the way the Cowboys flocked around him, yelling and cheering, eagerly striving to clasp his hands, he was a very popular leader. And such he was, because he was never behindhand in deeds of cruelty and rapine; wherever he led, his men were assured of ample plunder and excitement.

"There—easy, boys," at length exclaimed Anson, as he flung himself from the saddle. "I'm too tired and hungry for much talk. Zack—you black imp of Satan—where are you? Something to eat here, and be lively about it, too, d'y' hear?"

Silently a tall, gaunt negro produced a supply of eatables, rude though palatable, and the Cowboy leader ate as though famished. Topping off with a heavy draught of liquor tendered by one of his men, in a gourd-bottle, with a corn-cob stopper, Anson motioned for his men to gather around him.

Hastily recounting the ill success of his late expedition, for such of the survivors as had already returned had given the particulars, he told them of the peril he had himself escaped.

"Al Clarke sentenced us all to death," he added, in a grating tone, "and the devils hung Pace, Quigley and Koul. He gave me over to that mad Canton, who swore he'd skin me alive, but I managed to slip my bonds in time, at the expense of a little skin, as you see, and then stopped his wind with

his own knife. Then I ran for it, stole this horse on the road, and here I am.

"But though we failed in this last job we must make our mark. We have lost one-half of our band; better men than we will ever get together again, I fear. You all know to whom we owe this blow. Then shall we submit in silence and let them crow over us? I say *no*! Until we are strong enough to meet Clarke's rangers, hand to hand, let us strike them nearest their hearts. They have sworn the death-hunt against us. Our fate is sealed if we ever fall into their power. Then let us make sure of our revenge first. Do you understand me?"

"Yes—yes! Death to all—vengeance for our brave comrades!" came the cry, deep and vindictive, as from one man.

Bud Anson gazed upon the excited group with kindling eye and heaving chest. He seemed a worthy leader for such a devilish congregation.

"Good! This night will we begin. Make out a list of such as you know belong to Clarke's gang, and I will correct it. We'll pay them all a visit and be away to the swamps with our booty before he has time to return from his expedition. Don't let any but the appointed scouts and look-outs leave this till I return. Remember, at dark we move."

Anson first gave his weapons a thorough overhauling, changing the rifle for a lighter one. These arms he had confiscated at the time he killed Tom Canton.

Renewing his orders, he turned and strode rapidly from the spot, bending toward the east, in a short time striking a tolerably plain trail that in time led him out upon the high road, though this scarce deserved the name, it being so little traveled. An hour's steady tramp along this carried Anson into view of a pleasantly-situated frame dwelling, painted white, with Venetian blinds at the windows.

True taste and a love for the picturesque was visible in the building and its surroundings. The neatly-kept lawn and the flowers, the shrubbery, etc., all told of the supervision of woman's hand and eye.

But the Cowboy cared little for these. As he stood motionless beside the hedge, his eyes glistened with a lurid light,

and a deep flush suffused his bronzed cheek. There could be little doubt as to the cause of this emotion.

Standing upon the broad veranda, overseeing the movements of a huge negro, who was busily engaged in transplanting some shrubbery, was a woman. At that distance little could be told regarding her personal looks, though one could see she was a brunette of purest type, tall and admirably proportioned, evidently just upon the threshold of womanhood.

This was Nina Clarke as Bud Anson well knew. There was but one such face and figure for miles around.

The Cowboy did not hesitate long. First giving a glance to his weapons, assuring himself that they were in readiness for instant use, in case he should need them, he boldly advanced, knowing from experience that he would have nothing more formidable to face than the negro servants.

As he crossed the stile, the black glanced up and then hastily turned toward his mistress. Anson could see that he was saying something to her, and readily guessed its import. A black frown disfigured his otherwise handsome countenance, as Nina turned and entered the house, closing the door behind her. He saw that he was recognized.

"Hold, there!" cried the Cowboy, as the negro gathered up his tools and turned to retreat. "Don't be in such a hurry, Sleepy Tom. You've not half-planted that shrub. Finish your work first, then go and inform your young mistress that I solicit a brief interview with her, on matters of the greatest importance."

"She done see'd you comin'," drawled the negro, with a half-smile. "I 'spect she too busy to see you now, Marse Anson."

"None of your insolence to me, boy. Do as I bid you. Go tell her that I have come far to see her, and that see her I *will*, even though I have to enter without her permission. Do you understand?"

"I'll tell her. Needn't be so f'erce, dough. I cain't make her see you, kin I, say?" muttered Sleepy Tom, edging away from the Cowboy.

Anson significantly tapped his rifle-butt. Sleepy Tom waited for no more, but hastily stepped upon the veranda to the door of the dwelling. It resisted his efforts to open it,

Nina evidently having locked it behind her, on seeing who her visitor was.

"Stand aside," muttered Anson. "This is the way to unfasten such locks!" and he drove his massive shoulder heavily against the door.

It quivered and cracked. A second impulse burst the lock, and the door swung open. Anson smiled as he heard voices proceeding from the interior.

"There! Now go and deliver my message, then come and tell me her answer. If you are not back in just one minute I'll give you the contents of this," and he significantly cocked a pistol. "None of your tricks, now. I don't want to hurt any of you niggers, but if your mistress bids you warn the others, say your prayers first. You'll have no time to spare for them afterward."

Sleepy Tom, with a look of terror at the frowning pistol-muzzle, shuffled hastily through the hall and disappeared in the direction whence still proceeded the sound of voices. Bud Anson replaced the pistol in his belt, though one hand still rested upon its butt, and began humming, in a low, well-modulated tone, a snatch of some love-song. But there was a restless look about his eyes that told he was not so entirely at ease as this would indicate.

"Please, Marse Anson, Missy Nina say you mus' come whar she is ef you want to see her," faltered Sleepy Tom, as though in doubt as to how the message would be received.

"Very good—where is she? Lead the way, Tom. I'm not so particular as to where we meet."

"In de dinin'-room, sah."

Bud Anson paused upon the threshold, as the servant threw open a wide door. For a moment he appeared abashed, but then, recovering his impudence, he advanced, hat in hand, with a low and not ungraceful bow.

Beside a small table were two women—one seated, the other standing. They were alike in all excepting age. The resemblance stamped them mother and daughter.

Mrs. Clarke reclined in an easy-chair, her face ghastly pale from a recent illness. Though aged, her tall figure still retained much of its stateliness, and her features their classic beauty, that had made her name famous in bygone days.

Nina stood partly before her mother, erect and defiant, her face, though pale, scornful and firm, her large eyes burning with a contemptuous light. One hand hung by her side, hidden in a fold of her dress; the other rested reassuringly upon her mother's arm.

As Anson recovered from his low obeisance and noted the scornful smile that curled Nina's lips, his face flushed hotly, and his teeth closed with a grating snap. The devilish gleam once more filled his eyes, and he seemed again himself.

"You received my message, Miss Nina?" he at length uttered, his eyes lowering before that fixed gaze, despite himself.

"I did, and returned word that I declined seeing you," came the answer, clear and ringing as a bell.

"I plead guilty to disobeying your implied wish," returned the Cowboy, his assurance strengthening. "In fact, I must insist upon an interview with you, for a very important reason. I have a question to ask, an answer to receive, and there is not much time to waste. Can you guess what that question is?"

Nina did not reply, but gazed at the Cowboy with the same contemptuous smile. Anson bit his lips angrily, but choked down the hot words that sprung to his teeth.

"Silence gives consent—is it not so? But first let me remind you that circumstances have altered greatly since I last had an interview with you. The advantage lies in my hands now, and though it goes greatly against my will to use coercion, if you remain obstinate, I must."

Nina remained silent, though her hand closed reassuringly upon her mother's shoulder.

First you must know that, four days ago, I met your brother and his band of rangers with my men. Of course there was a fight, for he is no coward and leads good boys. But we were too many for them, with the advantage of a surprise. You can guess the result. First a defeat, then a hanging-bee, at which sundry captive Skinners played prominent parts. Your brother was one of them. Ha! that moves you!" and Anson laughed malignantly at the effect of his words.

"But do not misunderstand me—he was a spectator, not an actor. I had a little part for him to play, first—a play in

which this interview is Act Second. It rests with you whether it turns out a tragedy or a comedy; whether all winds up with a blaze of red fire, united hands and happy hearts, etc., or the tragic rope dangling from a swaying bough. Do you understand?"

"I understand this much—that your story is like yourself, too pitifully base and false to deserve other than contempt," cuttingly retorted the maiden.

"Ah! In plain words, I lie, then? Is that your meaning, my dear?" and the Cowboy laughed carelessly. "Unfortunately for your brother, it is all true. He is a captive in my power at this moment, not two miles from here, anxiously awaiting the result of my mission. And little wonder, for his life depends upon it. The rope is already twisted, the limb selected and the noose placed round his neck. You can guess the result, in case I am forced to return bearing your refusal."

"Even were you speaking the truth—even as I know you are lying now—still my answer would be the same. A union with Tom, yonder, would be far more preferable than one with you. Even to save his life, my brother would refuse such a proposal with scornful contempt. You have my answer—now leave us, before I call the servants to eject you!"

"All very pretty and high-sounding, I must confess, Miss Nina," laughed the Cowboy, insultingly. "But I pity your property should you give such an order. Though I am alone here, you have not force enough to harm me. Then a single call from this whistle would bring a dozen trusty men from out the field yonder. As a friend, I advise you to moderate your tone. My temper—as you should know by this time—is none of the best, and were it once to get the upper hand of me, *you* might be the sufferer."

"You threaten a woman! It needed but that to complete my contempt for you. Tom, show this person the door."

"Easy, my boy, unless you want to be made Sleepy Tom in earnest. And you, my high-toned lady, are going entirely too far. You're wholly in my power now, and I've half a mind to take you into camp, whether or no," fiercely uttered Anson, advancing toward Nina, who did not flinch, though her

lips tightly compressed and her hand moved among the folds of her dress.

"Stop!" and her voice rung out with startling distinctness. "Come no nearer. I am not so defenseless as you may imagine."

Anson heard a faint rustling behind him, and quickly turning, one hand dropped to his belt. The negro, Sleepy Tom, it was who had made the noise. The Cowboy gazed at him in mute astonishment.

He no longer deserved his *sobriquet*. His usually dull, stolid features were now aglow with intelligence and determination. His eyes glowed with a greenish luster similar to those of an enraged cat in the dark. His tall form, muscular and powerful, was gathered together, every muscle quivering as if for a leap, the long, sinewy fingers contracted like the talons of an eagle.

"Take keer, Marse Anson," he muttered, in a hoarse voice. "Don' you dar' tetch Missy Nina, or Sleepy Tom 'll choke you to deaf!"

"Bah! you black cur—do you think I fear you?" cried Anson, one hand drawing a pistol and cocking it even as it rose to a level. "One step toward me and I shatter your thick skull to atoms—back, I say—back!"

Sleepy Tom did not shrink or cower. His lips parted until the twin rows of huge white teeth glowed in the light. His voice was firm and even as he uttered:

"Say de word, Missy Nina; what you say, Sleepy Tom 'll do."

A metallic click, sounding from his rear, startled the Cowboy, and, with an agile bound to one side, he glanced at Nina. She stood with cocked and loaded pistol held in a steady hand, its black muzzle covering the outlaw.

"Begone! leave us, or your blood be upon your own head!"

"With *you*, then, proud wild-cat—not without!" hissed Bud Anson, as he crouched for a spring.

A hoarse cry broke from the lips of the giant black, and he bounded like a bear toward the Cowboy, his massive features aglow with hatred and determination. But Anson was not to be taken unawares, by a foe whom he despised.

A cat-like leap carried him clear of the double danger, and alighting almost beside the infuriated negro, his pistol spoke sharp and clear, sounding like the echo of the one held by Nina Clarke.

Sleepy Tom gave vent to a half-stifled groan, and tottering forward, fell heavily to the floor, the blood spouting from his head. Anson also staggered, and clapped one hand to his forehead, while the blood trickled down over his eyes.

His escape had been narrow indeed. Had Nina fired one second sooner, the bullet must have pierced his brain. Instead, his quick spring had carried him almost out of range, and only a flesh-wound was the result. But his brow would bear the bullet-trace to the day of his death.

"*You would have it so,*" snarled the Cowboy, as he brushed the hot blood from his eyes. "Then blame yourself—not me!"

He sprung forward like a wild beast bounding upon its prey, thoroughly maddened, forgetting his original plans in the fury of the moment. Nina drew back and struck at him with the empty pistol, throwing into the blow all the power of her body.

The barrel cut a gash upon his brow, but scarcely staggered him, and then his strong arms wound around her lithe form. A cry of fiendish exultation broke his lips as he felt his triumph, and, strong as despair made the maiden, she was like a child in his grasp.

With a piteous cry, Mrs. Clarke arose, and falling at the Cowboy's feet, clasped his knees with her arms. Her long gray hair, loosed from its fastenings, floated in wild profusion over her shoulders, her pale, terrified face uplifted, her voice raised in prayer for mercy.

With a brutal oath, Anson raised his arm and dashed his hard clenched fist full into the old woman's face, with all the power at his command. With a feeble groan she sunk backward, a lifeless heap, the dark blood flowing in streams from her mouth and nostrils.

Nina beheld the dread sight, and with a faint cry of horror, sunk senseless into the arms of the Cowboy. Laughing loudly, intoxicated with the frightful scene, Anson pressed his burning lips to those of the fainting maiden, then rais-

ing her to his breast, he turned and strode toward the outer door.

The excitement seemed to have given him a giant's strength, for the weight of the lifeless maiden appeared no more than that of a feather in his arms, though he reeled to and fro like one drunken. Drunken he was, but not with strong liquors. The sight of flowing blood, added to the knowledge that the long-coveted prize was at last securely in his grasp, filled his being with a delicious joy, until his brain whirled and danced with ecstatic delirium.

From without he could now distinguish loud cries and shouts, but they gave him little uneasiness. He knew that these proceeded from the lips of the negro servants, proverbially cowards, a score of whom, without arms, would not dare molest him while he held weapons in his hands. The sound of his voice raised in anger would scatter them from before him like a flock of sheep.

But, as he reached the outer door, he paused with a low cry. A dozen forms were scattered over the lawn, running hither and yon, in wild confusion. As he had thought, they were those of the negroes.

But it was not the sight of these that caused the look of alarm to overspread his flushed countenance. They alone could do him little harm.

Why then did he allow the fainting maiden to drop so suddenly from his arms? Why did he turn and spring back across the threshold so suddenly with a bitter curse upon his lips?

The forms of two men were just crossing the stile, where their horses stood, covered with sweat and froth. They were white men, bearing weapons, and even in that fleeting glance, Bud Anson recognized two of his most deadly enemies.

They were Captain Allan Clarke and Little Thunderbolt!

In that brief moment the Cowboy read the chances both for and against himself. He saw that, though alarmed by the sound of firearms and the terrified shoutings of the negroes, the rangers did not know the exact facts of the case. Even had they caught sight of his person—as was probable—they could not know whether he was alone or strongly supported.

Anson knew that, could he only regain the forests beyond the fields, he would be safe, for the woodsman did not live who could overhaul him in a fair race before his followers were reached. For this reason, then, he dashed through the house and out at the rear door, opening into a sort of kitchen garden. With a nimble leap the Cowboy cleared the low fence, and then continued his flight across the field.

Fortune favored him, for Clarke and Larrabee paused at the door, where still lay Nina in a death-like swoon. While Allan bent over her in breathless fear, Little Thunderbolt cautiously passed into the building, with ready weapons.

No enemy confronted him, however, and then he stood upon the threshold of the dining-room. A low cry burst from his lips as he took in at a glance the bloody scene.

Mrs. Clarke still lay as she had fallen, her face discolored and stained with blood. At a little distance lay the huge negro, Sleepy Tom, the blood still flowing from his head. Both seemed dead.

Little Thunderbolt sprang to the rear door, which was still open, as Anson left it. Just beyond the narrow field, Steve caught a glimpse of the Cowboy as he disappeared in the forest, and marked the course he was following. Then he returned to the chamber of death.

Stooping over the prostrate figure, he touched the woman's breast. A look of awe crept over his face, as one hand glided along and clasped the senseless wrist. There was no pulsation—he could no longer doubt the truth.

Mrs. Clarke had been murdered by the brutal blow from the Cowboy's fist.

"Poor Cap'n Al—an' the gal, too, I'm jubous," muttered Steve, rising erect. "It'll plum kill him."

A heavy tread at the door roused him, and springing forward he would have closed it, but before he could do so, Allan Clarke, bearing his sister's form in his arms, stepped over the threshold. A cry of horror burst from his lips as he beheld the still figure of his mother, and staggering, his nerveless arms dropped their burden.

"Easy, Cap'n Al—don't take it so hard," stammered Little Thunderbolt, as he caught Nina in his arms. "It won't make—"

"Mother, you are not dead—they have not killed you?" gasped Clarke, as he tottered forward and sunk to his knees beside the corpse of his dearly-beloved one.

A groan of heart-rending agony broke from his pallid lips as he realized the dread truth, and Little Thunderbolt shuddered as he beheld the stricken countenance, so full of woe, the most intense and heart-crushing. It was a scene that angels might have wept over.

A faint movement of the form in his arms, recalled Steve's attention to Nina, and to his joy, he beheld her open her eyes, with a low sigh. Dreading the effect of such a sight upon her weakened frame, he hastily bore the maiden into another apartment, and resting her upon a sofa, soon succeeded in restoring consciousness.

Through the open window he called in some of the servants, who timidly approached, and leaving them the charge of Nina, strictly enjoining them not to suffer her to leave the room, he hastened back to the bereaved son. As Steve entered the dining-room another surprise awaited him.

Sleepy Tom was just raising his head from the floor, gazing stupidly around him like one just awakeued from a deep slumber. The Cowboy's bullet had glanced from his thick skull, merely stunning him for the time being, though the blood flowed freely from the lacerated scalp.

"Good! Now we'll know," cried Little Thunderbolt, in a tone of exultation. "Quick, nigger—who was it? Who done all this 'ere deviltry?"

"Marse Anson, he done it," faltered Sleepy Tom.

Little Thunderbolt uttered a hoarse cry, and at the name Allan sprung to his feet, his face lighted up with a glance of horrible hatred.

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE THUNDERBOLT AT WORK.

"MAY God curse him and his, forever and ever!"

Little Thunderbolt shuddered despite himself, as these words fell with frightful distinctness from the pallid lips of the bereaved man, whose face was upturned, his right hand, stained with the blood of his murdered parent, raised aloft, as if invoking the curses he pronounced upon the head of the assassin.

"He will, depend on't, lad, he will cuss him for this day's work," solemnly returned Steve. "An' I'm one as'll help them cusses to 'light on him, too. It's only another count added to those as was already long a-plenty to doom him. This is his last job, I consait. But now, Allan, you must rouse up. Thar's your sister, yet, fer you to look to. Mebbe she don't know this, an' ef it was to come to her now, when she's so weak-like from the skeer that imp must 'a' given her, it 'd kill her, too. Go to her now, boy, an' break it to her as easy as ye kin. I'll send a nigger back to hurry the boys up, an' then 'll track that varmint to his den. I've got him marked down a'ready, I think. But fust, help me kerry her to one o' the back rooms. Tom, see that Miss Nina don't git out too soon."

With an effort Allan roused himself, and then the two men reverentially lifted the corpse and conveyed it to one of the chambers, the son drawing a sheet over her discolored features. Then he went to Nina, while Little Thunderbolt left the building and after dispatching one of the servants up the road, he crossed the garden and took up the trail left by the fugitive Cowboy.

Through the field this was easy enough to follow, and like a sleuth-hound upon a breast-high scent, Little Thunderbolt pressed on, his heart filled with deadly thoughts, his eyes blazing with a fiery glitter that boded ill to the murderer,

should he overtake him. Along the trail, through bush and bramble, across swampy places or dry ground, the scout pressed on, never for a moment at fault, though the trail was at times very faint.

"It's plain so fur," muttered Steve, from that habit peculiar to men accustomed to spend weeks and even months in solitude, giving vent to his thoughts in a monotone scarcely above his breath. "The reptyle is making for his old place, or nigh to it. Ef he's alone, I'll find him at the shanty o' Black Zack. Ef not—ef he's got his gang together ag'in, as is most likely, fer thar wa'n't more'n hafe o' them with him when we hed that scrimmage—then he'll be in the little swamp. But go whar he may, I kin foller him. The trail 'll run out some-time, an' then—*down ye go, Bud Anson!*"

Could the Cowboy chief have seen his pursuer then, he would have trembled with fear. He would have realized that he was doomed to death—that the avenger of blood was upon his track, and that sooner or later they must come into collision, when he would "go down!"

For half an hour Little Thunderbolt followed the Cowboy's trail, then abruptly paused, his gaze fixed upon the open space among the tree-tops before him. A smile of pitying contempt curled his lips and bristled the shaggy beard.

"A fool hes hed charge o' thet camp. Bud Anson must l'arn his men better 'n *that*, if he hopes to buck ag'in' Cap'n Al's rangers long. A blind man could see thet smoke 'th his eyes snet!"

The scout had indeed sighted a tiny column of smoke, thin and blue, and from its location, he had but little doubt that it arose from the camping-ground of the Cowboys. It also told him the course he must pursue in order to avoid discovery, if, as he desired, he was to gain a position near enough to see and hear what was going on within the camp.

Turning abruptly to one side, Little Thunderbolt glided stealthily through the underbrush, displaying the perfection of wood-craft in his silent but rapid progress. In this art Steve Larrabee was unexcelled.

Crossing a narrow strip of boggy ground, lying flat upon his stomach and writhing along like a human serpent, Steve soon found himself within sight of the encampment, though

hardly close enough to distinguish their words. As he paused beneath the shelter of a bush, Little Thunderbolt just caught sight of the murderer, Bud Anson, and his eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire as the long rifle was noiselessly cocked and leveled.

But then, with an inward struggle, Larrabee lowered the hammer. From his position only a partial glimpse could be obtained of the Cowboy leader, and did he fire, his own life would be almost certain to pay the forfeit. Though brave as the boldest, Little Thunderbolt was not without a due share of prudence.

"Thar's time a-plenty," muttered the scout. "Let the imp run a little longer. He seems desp'ritly in airnest; wish 't I was a little clusser. It might be wu'th hearin'."

A keen glance showed the scout another bush, thick and scrubby, some yards nearer the camp than the one beneath which he was then ensconced, and though the risk of being observed by some of the quick-sighted Cowboys was by no means trifling, Little Thunderbolt resolved to make the attempt, believing that, once there, he could eavesdrop the words of the speaker, and thus glean important information.

Fortunately for him, the Cowboys were all deeply absorbed in listening to the words of their chief, and the bold adventurer gained the coveted position in safety. Then, with ready weapons, he listened intently.

Bud Anson had been detailing his adventure at the house of Clarke, and the ruffians around loudly applauded his—to them—facetious story. It was of the exact sort to please their fastidious tastes.

"Well, that is all, but the appearance of those fellows has changed my plans somewhat, though I can't say that I am sorry. They are our deadly enemies, and the sooner they are put out of the way, the safer will we be. Now listen:

"We will pay them a visit to-night. They won't be expecting any thing of the kind, for they know that my band was pretty well cut up at the time I slipped them, and my going to the house alone will make them think I have no help near. That so, it'll be an easy matter for us to surprise them, and then, when they're disposed of, we'll go through the place for

all it's worth. I give up my share, and claim the young lady, instead. Are you agreed?"

"Yes—of course," came the prompt reply.

Little Thunderbolt overheard all this quite distinctly, and grated his teeth together in fury. Only that he believed he saw a safe chance to end the career of this demon, he would have shot him then and there, at the risk of his own life.

"We'll not need all the men—since those came in with Plunkett—and you, Harper, will take half and pay old Perkins a visit. Make a clean sweep; and you have leave to do as you will with any and all of the family. I mean to pay up all old scores before I leave these parts, as we must do soon, for good."

Little Thunderbolt dared not wait to hear more, for every moment increased his risk of being discovered, as he saw other members of the gang entering the glade, evidently being the relieved guards. Should one of them chance by this point, it might be fatal to him as well as his friends at the plantation.

Slowly and cautiously he writhed his way backward, until beneath the bush at which he had first paused. Here his heart gave a great throb as he caught sound of a heavy foot-step approaching, coming from almost directly along his back trail.

Noiselessly cocking his rifle, he awaited the result. In a few moments his worst surmises were confirmed.

A dark figure stepped into view, and after a quick glance around, bent its head and slowly advanced. Steve saw that it was an enemy, following up the trail he had left!

Knowing that discovery must come speedily, the scout resolved upon being the first to strike. Quick as thought his rifle uprose, was cocked, and, even as the trail-hunter raised his head, startled by the metallic click, the weapon spoke, its contents crashing through the Cowboy's brain.

Without a groan, the man fell forward, dead.

In an instant, all was confusion within the camp. With orders so strict regarding the discharge of fire-arms anywhere near the rendezvous, they knew that this must have been used by some enemy, and so lost but little time in preparing for the supposed attack.

This little delay probably preserved the life of Little Thunderbolt, since it allowed him time to gain cover beyond view of the glade, an opportunity he was by no means slow to improve. When once fairly within the swampy forest, he drew a long breath, and felt more at ease.

Only one thing did he fear now, and his lips tightly compressed as the thought occurred to him. If his identity with the unseen foe was suspected, would not Bud Anson believe that he had overheard their plans? If he did believe this, the first move of the Cowboy would probably be to thwart the effect of the discovery, by at once leading his men to the mansion, where but the single arm of Clarke was to oppose them. By this move, their plans could be still carried out.

With this fear urging him on, Little Thunderbolt exerted his every nerve to the utmost, fairly flying through the tangled forest, heading directly toward the dwelling where he had left Allan and his sister. Though were Anson to make the onset at once, he could not hope to cope in speed with their horses, he resolved to be in time to deal at least one blow at the marauders.

As he sprung into the field, a cry of thankfulness burst from Little Thunderbolt's lips, for he knew that he was yet in time. The Cowboy either had not thought of such a move or had been outsped.

The scout had already decided upon his plans, and lost no time in arranging the details. He had sent word to hasten up the small guard that had accompanied him and Clarke from the army, and with their aid he hoped to defeat the Cowboys, particularly with the advantage of having stout defenses to fight behind.

He found Allan with Nina, both very pale, but composed. The heavy blow had been too great for them to give way to idle despair or sorrow. Instead, it seemed to strengthen them, and when Little Thunderbolt announced the probability of the murderer paying them another visit, the same stern glow filled the eyes of both brother and sister.

"We hain't got no time to lose, Cap'n Al," he hurriedly added. "The riptyles may be here at any minnit. Kin you depend on any o' the niggers—I mean to use weepens, so's to hurt the varmints more'n they would us?"

"On Sleepy Tom and Old Mose. The others would only be in the way."

"Then we'll stow 'em all down sullen. Thar's weepens fer them two?"

"Plenty—I have them hid. I'll call in the blacks, and then we'll barricade the doors and windows. Is it not time for Preble to come up with the boys?"

"Sca'cely, yit. It's good four mile to his house, an' they'll be takin' it easy. But they'll be here in time. We kin hold out ontel they do come, an' the sound o' our burnin' powder 'll hurry 'em up."

But little more was said, the two men, with the negroes, busy-ing themselves with barricading the doors, cutting convenient loopholes, making the building as defensible as possible with the means at their command. By this time Little Thunderbolt felt assured that Bud Anson had not suspected him of being the one who had fired the death-shot, else he would have put in an appearance ere this.

"So much the better," he chuckled, gleefully. "They won't look fer sech a welcome as is ready fer 'em. The on'y thing 'at I'm afeard of *now*, is that they won't stick to it long enough to give us any *fun*. The riptyles 'll run at the fust smell o' powder."

"Not all of them," significantly added Clarke. "I only pray for a fair sight at that devil, Anson. If granted me, our account will be settled!"

The hours passed on drearily enough to the inmates of the dwelling. That most difficult of all trials—waiting—was theirs now.

Then too, as the sun sunk from sight, and the twilight settled down over the earth, a new cause of anxiety assailed them. Why did not their friends make their appearance? Could it be that any thing had happened to them? Without their aid, even Little Thunderbolt doubted whether they could successfully resist the Cowboys' attack; and to yield meant death.

"It's strange why Preble does not come!" muttered Clarke, half to himself.

"He's hed time a-plenty, ef the nigger didn't git to sleep on the way thar. He wouldn't waste no time onless he

couldn't help it. Mebbe he's run afoul o' some o' Anson's boys."

"If so, may God have mercy upon us!" solemnly uttered Allan.

"Tell me, brother," and, though low, Nina's voice was clear and firm, "what will be the result should Oren Preble not come—if those villains do attack us? Can we beat them off?"

"Nina—"

"No, tell me true. I am no coward. I wish to know what to expect. Tell me."

"Then if the band of Anson attacks us, as Steve overheard their plans, and Preble does not get here first, we are doomed. If we head them off at the door and windows, they'll try fire. But we'll make our marks on the devils, first! One glimpse of the murderer—that is all I ask!"

"Brother," and Nina's voice sounded strangely impressive, "do not forget me. You know what *he* has sworn. Death would be a mercy to that. You will save one pistol for *me*, if the worst come?"

Allan could not speak; his frame quivered like a leaf. Little Thunderbolt turned, his eyes glowing like sparks of living fire.

"She's right, lad, she's right. You must see that ef you look at it cl'arly."

"You are—Nina, you are right. Here—take this. I may be too busy at that moment—or dead. You are safe, now. You hold your life in your own hands. But promise me not to be too hasty—to wait until all hope is lost. You promise?"

"Yes—I promise."

Side by side, hand clasped in hand, the brother and sister stood, sternly awaiting the result. Though outwardly so calm, within was a raging tumult. Life was sweet, despite its trials and griefs.

There was yet a chance. Should Oren Preble arrive before the attack, all would be well; then the result would be a defeat for the Cowboys. But why this delay? Two hours since he should have been beside his officer and friend.

The young moon was faintly shining, and added to the

brilliant starlight, rendered objects below indistinctly visible to the human eye. Little Thunderbolt uttered a low cry, and peered eagerly forth from his loophole.

"What is it, Steve—Preble?"

"'Ither him or t'others. Look—by the wide gate. They 're comin' inside. Now—as they cross that strip o' light you kin see—cuss the luck!"

Allan tightly compressed his lips, his eyes gleaming sternly. He saw that, whoever the comers might be, they were not of his rangers. Doubtless they were Cowboys.

"It's the black-hearted imps!" muttered Little Thunderbolt; then turning to the negroes, he added: "Now look here, boys. You've got to fight for your lives, an' the better you fight, the longer you'll live. Git ready to shoot, but don't tetch trigger ontel I do. Then load an' fire whenever you see a livin' varmint out yender."

"Ready, Steve," muttered Clarke. "They intend making a dash for this door, knowing that Anson broke its hinges. Nina—step close in this corner. You will be safe from their bullets there."

"If *you* die, I have nothing to live for. My place is here, beside you," came the low, firm reply.

"Take 'em as they start fer a rush, boys. It's no use waitin' to git in the fust lick. *Now!*"

Larrabee's rifle rung out clear and sharp, closely followed by those of Clarke and the two negroes. Then, like an echo, the pistols of the two rangers spoke, with deadly effect.

The Cowboys had gathered together at a point directly opposite the hall door, evidently little expecting such a salute. This utter want of caution was evidence enough that they believed their approach unnoticed.

At such short range, the double volley was deadly in the extreme. Five bodies incumbered the ground, either dead or severely wounded, groaning in their agony. Like magic the survivors vanished, seemingly sinking down into the ground.

"Load, quick!" cried Little Thunderbolt. "They know us now, an' 'll set to work in dead airnest. Fer sech truck, they've got good grit."

The negroes were in high glee at their first success. They

at least had no doubt but that they would triumph in the end, and Little Thunderbolt was well satisfied not to undeceive them. He knew that they would fight all the better for feeling confident as to the ultimate result.

For full half an hour nothing further was heard or seen of the Cowboys, but the besieged did not for a moment relax their vigilance. One thing they dreaded above all others: that was fire.

Should the Cowboys have recourse to that ally their success was sure. The flames could be applied in a dozen different places without fear of detection until they had gained such headway as would make extinction impossible. Then there were but two courses open to the besieged. Either to remain within and die at their posts by a most horrible death, or else rush forth into the arms of their enemies.

While prudence would dictate this course to the Cowboys, two reasons opposed it; plunder and passion. The flames, in overcoming their enemies, would consume all the valuables as well. Then, too, after a manner, Bud Anson loved Nina Clarke. Only as a final resort would he call in the aid of fire.

“Hark!”

The sound, whatever it was that called this exclamation from Allan's lips, was immediately drowned by several quickly succeeding reports from without, the bullets of which crashed through the frail door, or else sent the glass in rattling showers to the floor, from the windows. Comparatively well sheltered, the four men peered forth through their loopholes, but only the quick flashes spouting forth from the bushes and trees around the yard, met their gaze.

Little Thunderbolt was too old a soldier to be long puzzled by this move. He knew that it was but a cover to screen a more desperate attack.

He bent his ear and listened intently. Suddenly, high above the rattling uproar, there came a still more startling sound. Though Little Thunderbolt frowned moodily, he did not appear surprised.

This was a loud, rattling crash, coming from the rear of the building. The besieged had little difficulty in interpreting it. The Cowboys were assailing the door with a battering-ram.

"Here, niggers," muttered Little Thunderbolt, in a quick tone, "help me fasten up this door. We must fight it out here. Work—work fer your lives, now!"

Such articles of heavy furniture as had not already been made use of, were dragged forward and piled against the door, that being the only one opening into the hall by which entrance could be obtained from the rear. They were none too soon, for amidst the wild shouts of the Cowboys, the outer door was hurled from its hinges and they poured into the building, raging like demons, only to find another barrier between them and their anticipated victims.

"Keep an eye on the imps outside, lad," muttered Steve, as he loosened the knife in its sheath and prepared for the struggle that was so close at hand. "We mus'n't let 'em take us on both sides to onc't. An' you, niggers, kin we depend on you? You won't be too bad skeered to fight, will ye?"

"Let 'em come, Marse Steve. Nigger do de best he know how," quietly replied Sleepy Tom.

"Good! That'll give me one more lick fer the varmints, fer I was goin' to shoot the fust o' you that turned tail. But you *must* fight. Ef we don't whip 'em, then we'll all be rubbed out. It's them or us, now. But watch—do your best when the time comes."

The Cowboys once more brought their battering-ram into requisition, and such was the force of their first rush, that the frail door splintered and the hastily-formed barricade tottered visibly. At a motion from Little Thunderbolt, the two negroes leveled their rifles and fired through the door.

Yells and curses of pain followed, and the heavy beam dropped to the floor. Larrabee smiled grimly. The battle-spirit was upon him, and he seemed impatient for the crisis to come, when it must result in a hand-to-hand conflict.

Exultant yells now broke forth from those of the Cowboys who had been firing upon the house, and breaking cover they dashed up to the building, evidently believing their friends had carried the day. With a deadly smile, Allan Clarke discharged first his rifle, then his pistol with an aim that was unerring. Two of the Cowboys went down, never to rise again of their own accord.

"Load quick, lad," gritted Little Thunderbolt, as he crouched down beside the wall. "One more rush'll fetch the door, an' then they'll be on us. Gi' them one round, then the cold steel!"

"Good-by, dear brother," murmured Nina, as her face was uplifted. "We will go to meet mother together!"

Allan did not reply in words, but choking back the swelling that filled his throat, he bowed his head and pressed a long, fervent kiss upon the pallid lips. They believed this to be their last, long farewell.

"Now—one at a time. You, Tom—then Mose. Don't waste two pellets on one critter. A'terwards, do your level best. As it falls—when I squeal, fire," hissed Little Thunderbolt.

He had not long to wait. At the third blow the door gave way, when the barricade tottered and fell, leaving the upper half of the doorway free, though still, to enter, the Cowboys would have to clamber over the furniture.

"Give 'em the best you've got, my black-skins!" yelled Steve, and the blacks nobly responded to the call.

Their shots were quickly followed by those of the scout and Clarke, at such short range, the slaughter being frightful. But, maddened by their loss, the Cowboys did not falter, and swarmed over the barricade, yelling like veritable demons.

"Make your licks count—every devil you kill now sends you just one step nearer to glory!"

Scarce knowing what he said, Little Thunderbolt uttered these words, that, in a less startling moment would have been laughable. The others spoke not a word, and then Steve also fought on in silence.

Though no light was burning within the building, at that moment, the combatants were faintly visible to each other, as the moon's rays shone in through the hall windows. Features could not be distinguished, but the assailed kept close together, hoping that as one of the Cowboys fell, it might prove the murderer, Bud Anson.

For a few moments it seemed as though the four men were about to triumph. The negroes, both giants in size and strength, seemed fairly maddened by the combined smell of powder and blood, and with clubbed rifles they cleared all

from before them. Even in that terrible confusion, Little Thunderbolt shouted out a word of praise to them.

But then reinforcements came. As the Cowboys entered, some bearing torches, by the light of which a volley was fired at the brave defenders, Old Mose, with a horrible groan, dropped his rifle and fell dead.

Sleepy Tom staggered, the blood spouting from his neck and brawny chest. A gurgling cry, or rather roar, issued from his lips, and then he bounded forward upon the enemy.

His huge hands clutched the foremost and crushed him to the floor like a child. His head bent, and then the strong white teeth met in the outlaw's throat. Even in death, Sleepy Tom had revenge.

Little Thunderbolt alone had escaped injury. A bullet creased Nina's white neck; another bored its way through Allan's shoulder.

"To the last, lad—hold up!" gritted Steve, as he crossed blades with a huge Cowboy, then adroitly dodging, plunged his knife hilt-deep in the outlaw's side.

This is *your* end, devil!" hissed a comrade of the slain man, as he thrust a pistol-muzzle full in Larrabee's face, and pulled the trigger.

Seemingly nothing but a miracle could save Steve, yet he did escape. The weapon hung fire, and with lightning quickness he stooped just in time, the flash singeing the top of his scalp.

"B'lieve you lie—go fust an' tell 'em I'm comin'!" snarled Little Thunderbolt, and whirling the man half round, pierced his spine with the broad blade.

All this passed like a flash of thought. The hall was now so crowded that only with difficulty could the Cowboys use their arms, while the weapons of the two friends kept a comparatively clear space in front.

But the end could not be protracted much longer. Nobly as the rangers fought, numbers must prevail at length.

As Allan sought to free his sword from the body of a Cowboy, where it was sheathed to the guard, another sprung forward, and with a clubbed pistol felled him senseless to the blood-stained floor; then leaped upon his body with uplifted

knife, one hand seeking his heart, the surer to guide the blow home.

Nina, throughout all this, had stood calm and firm, the merciful pistol cocked and ready in her hand. As the crisis drew near she raised it, the black muzzle resting against her temple. The white finger was just pressing the trigger as Allan fell.

At that sight, Nina forgot all else. Her brother's life was even dearer than her own, and without reflecting upon what would be her own fate, she stooped and thrust the muzzle fairly against the outlaw's head.

Even as the blood-stained knife uprose for the finishing blow, the pistol exploded with a smothered report, shattering the Cowboy's skull like an egg-shell. Sickened at the sight and sound, Nina staggered back, fainting, and was tightly clasped in the arms of a smoke-blackened figure, whose voice rung out clear and peremptory.

"Take 'em alive, boys—don't kill them if you can help it. A rope is the fittest death for such devils!"

Little Thunderbolt had staggered back beneath a heavy blow, and one hand rested upon the barrel of his rifle. With marvelous celerity he sprung erect, sweeping a clear space before him with the long weapon, and then, realizing at a glance that all was lost, he darted like an arrow through the doorway into the dining-room, from thence through a window, carrying with him sash and all, and then sped like a frightened deer across the lawn.

So unexpected was this action that he was clear of the house before any one thought of pursuit, but then half a dozen of the Cowboys followed, yelling in their mad rage. A low, taunting laugh came back to their ears as Little Thunderbolt leaped the stile and disappeared in the border of the forest.

Realizing the folly of pursuit now, the Cowboys turned back, visions of rich plunder filling their eyes, and in a manner banishing their disappointment at the escape of their foe. As fresh lights were procured, their rays fell upon a thrilling scene.

The figure of their chief, leaning against the wall, blood covering his features, one arm supporting the senseless form of Nina Clarke. Allan, bound with a stout belt, still lay in-

sensible in a pool of blood not all from his own veins. The two negroes were surrounded by a pile of dead and disabled.

The victory had cost the Cowboys dear. Over a dozen dead, half as many wounded, several fatally, marked their losses.

CHAPTER V.

A SISTER'S DARING.

FOR the first time Bud Anson remarked the absence of Little Thunderbolt. As his eye ran hastily over the prostrate figures, a scowl darkened his face.

"Where's the other—that Steve Larrabee?"

"Gone! He's the devil's own imp!" growled one of the wounded outlaws. "He's crippled me for life—look at that arm!"

"Lucky it's no worse, Jess. But come—let's finish up this job. Unfasten the door, and then clear the hall of such of the boys as are not dead. The others may as well stay here. It'll save the trouble of our planting them."

"We'll go through the house fer truck, before you burn it, won't we?"

"Of course—am I a fool? But work—that devil of a scout may give us trouble yet, unless we hurry through."

Anson dragged a large arm-chair, that usually stood in the hall, out upon the veranda, and seating himself, rested Nina upon his lap. With difficulty he poured a few drops of fiery corn-whisky down her throat, then, giving himself no further uneasiness concerning her recovery, he directed the movements of his men.

Several of the lights had been cast out upon the lawn, and now, with broken furniture as food, the blaze was leaping high, crackling merrily, sending sparks heavenward in dancing clouds. This lurid light rendered the scene all the more impressive.

The wounded Cowboys were carefully conveyed outside and placed where the contemplated *finale* could be easily

seen, in a measure as balm to their injuries. The dead, their pockets adroitly rifled, were left as they had fallen.

A word from Bud Anson had given the men their cue. A stout rope was cast over the limb of the tree that stood to the left of the gravel walk, before the building. At one end stood several strong-armed outlaws, their brutal faces aglow with anticipation; at the other dangled a hastily-formed noose.

"It's all ready, now, Cap," called out one of the men.

"Wait a bit," replied Anson. "I want the girl to see it—then she'll know I am not one to hesitate at trifles."

Then the Cowboy, with a harsh laugh, repeated the dose of liquor, with almost immediate effect. Coughing, half-strangled, Nina opened her eyes, gazing around in momentary bewilderment.

But the truth soon came upon her as Anson hissed a few words in her ear, and with a cry she strove to free herself. Laughing malignantly, the Cowboy chief held her fast, then ordered the fun to proceed.

Nina suddenly became quiet, the blood chilling in her limbs, her entire form seemingly paralyzed. She now realized the horrible meaning of the scene.

Allan Clarke, pale, bloodstained and haggard, bound hand and foot, was lifted up from the ground and supported in an erect position beneath the tree. The knotted rope dangled menacingly before his eyes, only too plainly telling him the doom pronounced against him by his enemies.

One pang was spared him. He knew not that his dearly beloved sister was alive, even then gazing upon him in frigid despair. The Cowboy sat in the deep shadow, and from the lawn was invisible.

Perhaps this choice of position was unpremeditated; perhaps he remembered that Little Thunderbolt had escaped, and that he held a particular grudge against his person.

"Allan Clarke," called out Bud Anson, in a clear, taunting tone, "behold your doom—the same that you designed for me, not many days since. Meet it bravely, for the honor of our cloth. The eyes of beauty and of chivalry rest upon you. Your sister—my prospective bride—hopes you will not disgrace her by showing the white feather."

"A liar, now as ever, Bud Anson," coldly uttered Clarke. "Thank God! Nina has escaped you, even though she is the bride of *death*!"

"Bah! you think so? Tell your brother farewell, my precious. What! you are obstinate? Very well. Have your way *now*—it will be time enough, by-and-by. Borden, fetch a light this way. Now, Clarke—look! Am I lying?" added Anson, triumphantly, as the blazing brand momentarily revealed the pallid countenance of the maiden.

Clarke bowed his head with an agonized groan. Until this he believed that Nina had kept her vow—that she had made good use of the pistol. To see her now, helpless in the power of this demon, was indeed bitter, the more so that it was beyond his power to help her, his death being so nigh at hand.

"Nina—God help you now! I prayed that you had used the pistol I gave you. Better such a death, than what now awaits you!"

"I did use it—when that man was about to drive his knife to *your* heart, I forgot myself in *your* danger. I killed him," faltered the maiden.

"Better *that* death than this," was the gloomy reply. "But remember your mother, sister. Death before dishonor. Promise me—then I can die easier."

"I promise—"

"Stop his jaw!" cried Anson, far from being pleased at the turn taken by the conversation, from which he had expected to derive such pleasure. "String him up—then go through the ranche. No more fooling—up with the rebel!"

Allan turned his head for a last glance at his sister, but with a curse a Cowboy dealt him a blow that staggered him, and then the noose was roughly placed round his neck. As the rope was drawn taut, the two men sprung forward to assist their comrades, with loud yells of diabolical delight.

Nina struggled desperately to free herself, but the arms of the Cowboy chief held her fast. Half-senseless she closed her eyes to shut out the fearful scene.

The first pull jerked Clarke's feet clear of the ground, his body swinging to and fro, slowly turning round. It seemed as though his doom was sealed, beyond all earthly hope.

But at that critical moment an interruption came, in a truly startling shape. From the darkness beyond the road, shot forth a bright spurt of flame, and, as the spiteful report of a rifle rung forth, one of the Cowboys uttered a dull groan and sunk to the ground, with a bullet-pierced brain.

In momentary terror, the survivors relaxed their grasp upon the rope and precipitately sought the nearest cover. The form of Allan Clarke fell heavily to the ground, quivering in every fiber.

Bud Anson sprung to his feet, still holding fast to the mailen, and glared around in alarm. But as the report was not accompanied by others, he soon divined the truth.

It was the deed of Little Thunderbolt, and he was alone, else a charge would have closely followed the shot. Greatly relieved, the Cowboy chief shouted out:

"It's only Steve Larrabee—three of you take to the woods, and if he shows himself again he's your meat. You, Borden, take Sam and Claggett with you. Quick!"

The three outlaws designated, clutched their rifles and stole toward the road, keeping well covered. They in nowise underrated the prowess of the scout.

During this interlude, Nina had in a great measure recovered her usual courage, and given an idea by the interruption, proceeded to put it into execution. Though the strong arms held her tight, she succeeded in her purpose.

Struggling as though to free herself, one hand sought the belt of the Cowboy chief. A thrill of joy pervaded Nina's frame as her fingers clasped round the buck-horn haft of the long-bladed knife. Still struggling, she drew the weapon from its sheath, unsuspected.

The Cowboys, reassured by the move of their comrades, now ventured forth and again grasped the rope, though seeking the deep shadows cast by a neighboring tree that stood between them and the fire. As the rope tightened, Nina put her project into execution.

Held as she was, it was her left hand that had secured the knife. Though this arm was tightly pressed across the outlaw's breast, she could still move her wrist, and turning the point against Anson's side, Nina pressed upon it with all the force at her command.

At the acute pain, so unexpected, Anson uttered an oath, and staggered back, tearing the blade from the wound by his action, releasing his hold upon Nina, who lost no time in improving the opportunity. Quickly as the flight of a startled fawn, she sprung from the veranda, out upon the lawn, and in an instant was beside the swaying form of her brother, whose feet were again lifted clear of the ground.

A single touch of the keen blade severed the taut rope, and the bound figure fell heavily to the ground, as, at the other end, the outlaws went down in a confused heap. Standing over her brother, in the full glow of the red fire-light, Nina looked like an avenging spirit.

With a cry of anger, Anson sprung toward her, but the words that came from her lips, clear and perfectly distinct, arrested his steps. She raised the knife above her swelling bosom, the stained blade dripping red drops down upon the white dress.

"Hold! one step nearer and I kill myself! Though we both die, I will foil your hopes in that. *You* should know whether I am one to keep my word or not."

"Say the word, Cap," called out one of the Cowboys. "Shall I wing her? I kin make her drop the weepion afore she kin use it."

"No—the man who injures her, dies at my hands," cried Anson; then, suddenly changing to German, he added: "Deiderick, you there?"

"Yes, captain," came the quick response from out the shadows beyond where stood the daring sister.

"Good! I can depend on you. Steal up and take her prisoner. Don't give her a chance to use the knife, or she'll—"

"I hear your words and understand them, fool," cried Nina, also speaking in German. "You will never take me alive, again."

"Wait, Deiderick. Now, Nina, darling, tell me what you expect to gain by this? Even should you contrive to cut the bonds of your brother, what good will that do you? He is surrounded—he can not escape; that is simply impossible. Then what is your purpose?"

"To save him from *that* death—and to die with him by my own hand, rather than live in *your* power."

The three men dispatched to look for Little Thunderbolt hearing the sudden commotion, had returned to learn what was the matter, and now stood with their comrades. In his parleying Bud Anson had an object in view.

By a simple motion he had countermanded his orders to the German, telling him to secure the maiden if possible, as plainly as though the words had been spoken aloud. And like a serpent the Cowboy was gliding toward Nina, his eyes gleaming like coals of fire.

He gained the tree-trunk, then crouched low down for the leap. The leap was taken, but not in life.

A sharp report rung out, the blaze lighting up a bush not a score yards distant, and with a horrible yell the strained muscles relaxed as the lithe form sprung headlong forward, falling as a quivering heap beneath the tree, in the full glow of the firelight, almost at the feet of Nina. Instantly all was confusion and dismay among the Cowboys.

A peculiar yell rung out close following the death-shot—a yell that they had often heard, never entirely without fear; the war-cry of the scout, Little Thunderbolt. Like that which had bestowed upon him his *sobriquet*, Steve Larrabee leaped forward and alighted beside Nina, who recognized him with a low, glad cry.

Other sounds came slowly following upon the heels of the death-shot. A rattling volley rung out, the flash brightly lighting up the lawn, revealing half a score figures that then leaped forward, uttering a loud, clear cheer: the well known slogan of Clarke's rangers.

The Cowboys did not wait to meet their onset. As the deadly storm of bullets swept through their ranks, they seemed to melt away, vanishing amid the gloom like shadows. Nor was Bud Anson, their valiant leader, much behind them.

He discharged a pistol with hasty aim at the scout, then turned and fled at top speed. Little Thunderbolt only followed him a few yards, then returned to look after his friend.

Nina sunk to the ground, completely overcome at this sudden and unexpected preservation, but then a hollow groan from the lips of her brother, roused her sinking senses. Tenderly she lifted his head, resting it upon her lap, and pressed her pallid lips to his quivering eyelids.

Allan feebly opened his eyes and gazed up into her face with a wandering expression. For a moment he seemed to think that this was indeed death.

"Nina—then you *did* keep your vow, and that was all a frightful dream! Thank God! But where is mother?—I do not see her."

"Allan, dear brother—you do not see? We are saved—you are not dead!" murmured Nina, her tears falling fast, as she removed the severed halter from around the swollen and discolored neck.

"Not—I don't understand," faltered Allan, as he struggled to arise.

"You will soon, lad," interrupted the cheery voice of Little Thunderbolt, as he stooped with keen knife quickly severing the stout thongs. "The boys got here at last, an' cleaned out the pesky varmints. But you must thank the little one here, as, only fer her, you'd 'a' bin cold meat afore this. They hed you hafe way to glory, when she cut ye down, cap'n."

Allan silently pressed Nina's hand, as the scout assisted him upon his feet. He did not speak—his feelings were far too deep for utterance, but she understood him.

At this moment a young man, handsome and prepossessing despite his stained and soiled attire, hastened up and warmly greeted Clarke, at the same time bowing low, with flushed cheek and sparkling eye, to Nina. This was the man so frequently alluded to during the night, as Oren Preble.

"The survivors have fled, Captain Clarke," he said, in a clear, musical voice, "but we have a number of wounded prisoners. What are your commands concerning them? They all belong to Bud Anson's gang of Cowboys."

"Place them under guard for the present, then come to me. I wish to learn the cause of your long delay in answering my message," coldly replied the ranger captain.

"I will do so. I think you will hold me free from blame, when you hear my report," was the low reply, the soldier's beardless cheek deeply suffused as the clear eyes of Nina rested upon him.

"I don't think the boy's to blame, Cap'n Al," muttered Little Thunderbolt, as they moved toward the house.

"Though I hain't see'd the nigger, some o' the boys told me how it was."

"What do you mean, Steve?"

"You know when I sent the nigger? Wal, I told him to kerry the news to Preble ef he died fer it, an' it seems the varmint was true grit ef he was a nigger. He met a couple o' fellers at Dry Crick—they must 'a' bin some o' Anson's gang, from thar doin's—an' es he didn't like thar looks, he tried to hide in the bresh ontel they got by. But the keen-nosed riptyles smelt him out, an' one o' them give Pomp a pill that broke his leg. They must 'a' larruped him well, fer the boys say he was jest one mass o' blood an' bruises."

Clarke uttered an exclamation. Nina shuddered and her eyes filled with pity.

"You know the crick—it ain't more'n hafe way to Preble's from here. Wal, soon's that nigger, badly used up as he must 'a' bin from the tell, got his senses back ag'in, an' memberin' what I told him, kept on, draggin' himself—as he must 'a' did, with a broken leg—along by his hands, ontel he kivered that two miles. Think o' that—fer a nigger!"

"When he got to the house he was clean tuckered out, an' it was all o' hafe a hour afore they brought him to tell what was up. Then the boys set out hot-foot fer here. I heerd thar hoof-strokes as I lay out yender, an' made to meet 'em, fer fear they'd skeer the varmints too soon. Wal, we crept up, an' here we air. But, es I said afore, only fer the gal here, you'd 'a' bin cold meat, fer all we could 'a' done."

"I am ready to report, Captain Clarke," said Preble, at this juncture, coming up and saluting, speaking in a cold tone that told how deeply he had been injured by the words of his commander.

"Give me your hand, Oren, old fellow," cried Clarke, warmly. "Forget what I said a bit since. Steve, here, has explained it all, and I now see that you were not to blame."

"I thank you, too, Mr. Preble, softly added Nina, as her white hand found itself warmly clasped in the firm palm of the soldier. "A minute later, and we would have both been dead."

Preble did not speak, but his face betrayed his emotions.

Then, for the first time, Nina interpreted the truth. The young lieutenant of rangers loved her with all his soul.

"Nina," said Clarke, gravely, turning to his sister, "you are sadly wearied. Go and take a little rest. You will need all your strength for the trials of the morrow. We will leave this place with the day, forever, I fear."

"But mother—"

"She is dead. There is only one service we can render her now. Tell Chloe to prepare her for the grave," briefly added Clarke, in a hoarse tone.

"But, Allan, I—"

"Must I command you, sister? Believe me, I have reasons for this. You have endured enough, already, without witnessing what is to come. Go in—and God bless you, my darling."

With a shudder Nina pressed her pallid lips to those of her brother, and then entered the house. She read aright the stern fire that filled his eyes. And yet, as she recalled the horrible deeds of the outlaws, she could not find it in her heart to plead against their impending doom. With her murdered mother lying so near, she could not feel one gleam of pity for the ruthless marauders.

"Better let us do this, Cap'n Al," muttered Little Thunderbolt, as Clarke wearily arose to his feet. "You air plum played out. Go lay down. We know what you mean, an' you kin trust the boys to do the job up in style."

"No, Steve—it is a duty, and a *pleasure*. Look at this—" and Clarke touched the livid ring that encircled his neck. "God pity those who fall into my hands now—for they'll need it. I can not forget my murdered mother; this night has changed me to a very devil!"

"No wonder, nuther. It's made *me* wolfish. The varmints deserve all they'll git, even ef we hedn't made no oath to sarve 'em so. Come—lean on me. We'll hurry it through, then you must be 'tended to, or that shoulder 'll give you trouble yit."

"It's only a flesh-wound—my throat hurts more. I suffered death ten thousand times over, in those moments when my feet left the ground!" and a convulsive shudder agitated the stout frame of the ranger captain.

"Never mind, lad; it'll feel a heap better when you know them or'nary varmints is undergoin' the same tortur'," quaintly added Little Thunderbolt.

CHAPTER VI.

PREPARING FOR FLIGHT.

THE rangers proceeded about their terrible work with as much *sang froid* as they could have displayed were they making preparations to attend a ball, instead of dispatching a number of their helpless enemies into the other world without time for repentance. But they had received most fearful cause for hatred toward this band, and did not feel that they were committing a crime against God or man, in thus acting.

Allan Clarke took his station beneath the tree which was soon to bear such horrible fruit, where he supported his sore and stiff form against the trunk, while Little Thunderbolt hurried up the preliminaries. The fires had been replenished, and now rendered the entire lawn nearly as light as day.

Though little apprehension was felt concerning further trouble from the dispersed Cowboys, yet the ranger captain was not one to endanger his command by want of proper caution. Several of his most trusted men were posted around the grounds, so that it would be almost impossible for any human being to approach within gun-shot unobserved.

"Thar's seven o' the varmints as wants doctorin', boys. We'll hev to token 'em by turn, I reckon. The halters won't hold out."

"You will find plenty of rope at the well, Steve," called out Clarke.

"Good! It'll save time, an' we hain't got none too much to lose, now. Here, Hopkins, your fingers is the limberest, I reckon. You help tie the slip-knots. Make 'em good an' smooth—don't want to hurt the varmints more'n we kin help."

Under Clarke's watchful eye all went off smoothly and with-

out a hitch. The wounded wretches, pleading piteously for their lives, were inexorably dragged to the fatal nooses, then hoisted into eternity without a single pang of regret or compunction stirring the hearts of the rangers.

In those days the border-law—*blood for blood*—was supreme. To-day it was their turn—with the rising sun, the victor now might become the vanquished.

In cold and stony silence Clarke maintained his post until the last one of the doomed Cowboys was suspended between heaven and earth, then turned toward Preble, who stood near. The usually firm voice faltered as he spoke:

“Bid the boys gather round, Oren. There’s more work for them to do. This night will bring them little rest, I fear.”

Preble did not reply in words, but his hand warmly pressed that of the bereaved soldier in mute assurance of his heartfelt sympathy. Then his voice rung out clear and distinct, and in obedience to the summons, the rangers quickly gathered round their officers.

“Men,” began Clarke, his voice sounding hard and strained, with the intense effort he made to retain his composure, “now that our first duty is well performed, I must ask a favor of you, not as your leader, but as a man and friend. Some of you may have heard of the severe blow that has fallen upon me—that my poor old mother lies in yonder house, dead—murdered. You know, too, that our leave of absence is limited. Only with the greatest difficulty could I obtain even that length of time, when I feared that my people were in danger of Bud Anson’s gang of cut-throats. You have worked nobly, with little rest, since we left camp, and I hate to ask more of you, but—”

“No, no—you deserve ten times what we can do for you,” cried one man, and his words were reëchoed by the others with a fervor that testified to their truth.

“Good boys! An’ I kin lick the man that says you ain’t all o’ ye *white*, plum’ to the backbone,” muttered Little Thunderbolt, approvingly.

“Thank you, my friends. It is a sad service I ask of you. At daybreak we must start for Charleston. Before that time my dead must be buried. I am wounded, not severely, but

enough so to prevent my digging the—the grave. That is why I ask this of you. Larrabee knows where I wish the—the grave to be. Will you do this for me, my friends?"

"Bet ye—an' mighty glad o' the chaine, too!" spluttered one man.

"Ye pesky muttonhead, you, what d' ye mean!" angrily muttered the scandalized scout.

"Never mind—I understand him, Steve," wearily added Clarke. "Come, Oren; I believe I'll trouble you to bind up my shoulder. It begins to pain me in the night air."

Allan first proceeded to the death-chamber, where he found Nina weeping beside the corpse. Though his tall form quivered like an aspen leaf, no tear came to dim the hard, metallic luster of his hollow eyes. As he had said, that night had wrought a fearful change in the naturally gay and light-hearted soldier.

"It would have been wiser, child, had you followed my advice; but I have not the heart to chide you now. Chloe, finish your work. In half an hour she must be at rest in the grave."

"Allan—"

"It must be so, Nina. With the day we start for Charleston. My leave of absence will hardly be long enough, as it is, without more delay. Come, Oren, I must ask your help now."

The shoulder was examined and carefully dressed. Though only a flesh-wound, the bullet had made a ragged cut, that might be dangerous if not properly cured for.

"Do you know what we had decided upon, just before the negro brought me your message—I mean father, Lottie and myself?" said Preble, while fastening the bandage with skillful fingers.

"No; what was it?" listlessly asked Clarke.

"To join your sister in the journey. I, like yourself, am a marked man among the Tories here, and I only wonder that we have so long escaped without more serious losses. I dare not risk their lives any longer here. 'Twill be but a few miles out of your way, and by a little harder riding we can make that up easily."

"As you will. It may be best so. Better lose all your

property than, by remaining to care for it, risk such a blow as has been dealt me."

"It is a blow that shall be bitterly avenged," cried Preble, his eyes flashing fire. "Here is my hand, Allan—I swear, with you, to have revenge upon the devils who wrought this ruin. I loved your mother as though she had been mine—as I hoped she might be, some day."

"Thank you, Oren. I accept your pledge, and though this is hardly the time to think of such matters, you have my good will so far as Nina's love is concerned. But I fear you are doomed to disappointment there. She does not love you, as yet."

"I only ask time—such deep and ardent love as is mine for her, will win its own reward," replied Preble.

A light step was heard in the hall, and then Little Thunderbolt appeared. The soiled appearance of his garments told plainly that he had been busy in preparing the last resting-place of his old friend.

"It's ready, Cap'n Al. Though I don't want to hurry you, time is rollin' on as fast as ever, an' thar's a heap to do yit, afore we kin take to the road!"

Allan strove to speak, as he warmly pressed the hard palm of the scout, but the words refused utterance. The wild light in his eyes alarmed Steve; he feared the overtaken brain was giving way.

"I understand you, lad," he hastened to add. "I hed the boys fix it. It's rough—too rough a shell fer sech a jewel as she ever was—but it's the best we could do in the hurry. I thought you'd best take Nina away, afore we brung it in."

"Thank you, Steve; now, as ever, the kind, thoughtful friend. Believe me I will not soon forget it," and then as if afraid to trust himself further, Allan turned abruptly away and sought the side of his sister.

"Come, Nina," he murmured, gently caressing the bowed head. "I wish to speak with you for a moment, alone. First, do as I do—for the last time, kiss her who was the dearest and best friend you ever knew upon earth."

In silence brother and sister bowed their heads, and their hearts went up in prayer for the repose of their loved dead. As his lips gently touched the marble-cold brow, a falling

tear sparkled in the candlelight. Then, hand in hand they turned and left the room.

"You can guess why I brought you here, sister," said Allan, in a whisper, as he drew the almost fainting maiden close to his breast. "Steve and Oren, with Chloe's help, will place her in the coffin. I could not do it—it would kill me! And now, darling sister, I must ask a favor of you. Can you command yourself during the scene that is before us? I pray that you can. Unless you do—at the sight of your weeping, I would break down, and if possible I must keep my brain clear for what is to come. I ask it of you as being better for us all. Promise me to be brave—to hide your emotions, if possible. That will give me the necessary courage. I am so shattered and broken down, that I dare not give way for a moment, and I need all my energies now. Will you do this for me, sister?"

"Yes—God helping me, I will, Allan. You have been tried even more severely than I have, and no action of mine shall give you the slightest pang. Trust me; though my heart be breaking, I will not betray it to your eyes, in my face or actions," bravely replied Nina.

"My precious sister!" murmured Clarke, his chest heaving convulsively. "We must be all in all to each other now. You are all that is left me to care for on earth."

In silence, tightly clasped in each other's arms, the brother and sister heard the heavy tramp of the men as they bore out the corpse. Then with one long kiss they arose and emerged from the building, Clarke baring his feverish brow to the cool night breeze.

It was a deeply-impressive scene.

The spot chosen was upon a little knoll, beneath the gracefully-drooping boughs of a white elm. This, in life, had been Mrs. Clarke's favorite resort, and here Allan decided that she should rest.

Several bewildered negroes were ranged around, bearing lighted pine knots, the lurid glow flickering vividly over their awe-stricken countenances and staring eyes as they gazed in silence upon the solemn scene.

Nina and Allan stood side by side, hand in hand, their faces pale and rigid, their eyes hard and dry. They gave no

outward token of the fearful struggle that was going on within their hearts.

Little Thunderbolt and Oren Preble gently lowered the rude shell into the grave, then stepped aside. Allan glanced around upon the silent group, and his eyes lighted up as he addressed an old and gray-haired man.

"Mr. Morgan, will you please deliver a few words of prayer for the rest of her who lies here? I can not—my heart is too full of hatred against those who wrought this. I could only utter curses!"

The aged ranger stepped forward and knelt beside the open grave, then raised his voice in prayer. Rude and unlettered though he was, there was a peculiar fire and eloquence in his words that befitted this strange burial far better than the most polished rhetoric would have done. The words went to the hearts of his hearers, for they knew that he only spoke the truth.

As Morgan arose, passing a hard hand across his eyes, Clarke stepped forward and knelt at the head of the grave. Without a word, Oren Preble imitated his example. The voice of the bereaved son, though raised scarcely above a whisper, rung through the hearts of the listeners like the clear notes of a bell.

"Mother, hear my vow. I will never know peaceful rest until your murder is avenged. If I fail, or falter in the work before it is accomplished, look down from your spirit home and curse me for a recreant son!"

"Your oath is also mine, Allan Clarke," uttered Oren Preble, as his hand sought that of the ranger. "And I call upon all here to witness it."

"Thar's luck in odd numbers, they say," quietly quoth Little Thunderbolt, "so you may jest as well count me as number three."

"Thanks, my friends; I understand and accept your pledges. But now—time passes. Nina, shall we return to the house?" he added, fearful for the strength of the maiden.

"Not yet, Allan," was the reply, bravely smiling as their eyes met. "Do not fear for me—I have promised."

The grave was quickly filled in, and then Little Thunderbolt quietly planted a rude, hastily-formed cross at the head.

Allan turned abruptly away, deeply touched by this fresh token of thoughtfulness from his friend.

"Nina," he said, hoarsely, "go to the house and pack up such things as you can not do without. Remember that this must be a forced march, and only the lightest baggage can be managed. I will have the light top carriage arranged for you. You are not able to sit a horse now; besides, Lottie Preble will accompany us."

"The servants—what will become of them?"

"We can do nothing with them at present; they can remain here for the time being. No one will molest them. But go now—and hasten. There is little time to spare."

"Cap'n Al," said Little Thunderbolt, coming up as Nina turned toward the house, "what shell we do 'th them car'on thar?" nodding toward the dangling bodies of the Cowboys.

"Let them hang as a warning to their brethren," was the stern reply.

"All right; I only thought it was a durned shame to waste sech good rope halters on the or'nary varmints, when thar's so many more o' the same kidney layin' round loose waitin' fer a dose o' the same med'cine," dryly added Steve.

"You're right, Larrabee," said Clarke, with a grim smile. "Tell the boys to dispose of them, then see that the cattle are got ready for the road. Daybreak is not far away, now."

"It's lightin' up in the east, a'ready. Bat we won't waste no time. I see'd to hevin' the critters fed, long ago. We'll be ready whenever you be."

Allan now informed the servants of his intentions, telling them they were free to do as they wished; either to remain at the plantation, or to follow on after their mistress to Charleston. Their utter bewilderment would have been amusing, at any other time, but now Clarke hastened away to escape their pleadings that they might be allowed to accompany his party, he knowing how utterly impossible that would be, with the limited time at his disposal.

An hour later the little cavalcade took up its departure from the place that had witnessed so many tragic and thrilling scenes during the past few hours. Pale and haggard, yet with dry and tearless eyes, the brother and sister gazed back upon their once peaceful and happy home, now dimly revealed

by the breaking of day, bidding it a mental good-by, perhaps forever.

As a turn in the road shut out their view, Allan plunged spurs rowel deep into his animal's sides, and madly dashed ahead, half wild with grief and despair. Nina sunk back among the curtains, and bowing her head, wept long and bitterly.

Oren Preble, with a few hasty directions to Little Thunderbolt, gave rein to his horse and sped up the road with a double purpose in view. But the first—that of recalling his captain to himself—was useless.

He suddenly came upon the young ranger, quietly sitting his horse in the middle of the road, cold and composed, evidently having regained complete mastery over himself. Preble could not refrain from shuddering as the gray twilight revealed the ghastly pale and haggard features, rendered all the more deathlike by the lurid glow that burned in the large eyes.

"You are ill, Allan?" he hastily uttered, drawing rein.

"Only in heart—not in body, good friend. But there is a cure for it—and I will find it, even though I spend years in the search. But where are you going?" he added, his voice suddenly calming.

"To warn father of your approach. I can have all ready by the time you get there. There's ample room for Lottie in the carriage, and father still has his favorite horse. You will wait here until they come up?"

"Yes. You need fear for me no longer. Oren, I have fought the battle and have conquered; I will not give way again. But hasten on. Every moment must be improved now."

Prebel gave rein to his spirited horse, and dashed like an arrow's flight along the road, not once drawing rein until his own house was reached. As he sprung to the ground, two figures appeared upon the broad veranda; those of an old man and a young girl, some years younger than Nina—his father and sister.

The greeting was warm and loving, but Oren replied to all their queries with the words:

"You must wait—there's no time to answer you now. Al-

lan and his sister are coming, and expect to find you ready for the road. So you see there's no time to lose."

"How are we to go? Is there room for three in the carriage?"

"Nina is alone. Her mother is dead," gently responded Oren.

"Dead!"

"Murdered, yesterday, by that devil incarnate, Bud Anson. We buried her, not two hours since."

In awe-stricken silence Lottie prepared for the hasty flight. She could scarcely realize the truth of the tidings, for only two days before, they had all been together, planning so many joyful surprises and amusements when their loved ones should once more return home, never more to depart.

And now—! Her rosy cheek paled as she thought of what must be the anguish of her friends; how deeply Allan must grieve, for right well she knew how passionately he loved his mother. In her sympathy for him, Lottie almost lost sight of what Nina must have endured.

Strange as it may appear, these two, Oren and Lottie, both loved those who were ignorant of the fact, and who only felt friendship in return. Though she had never dared allow herself suspect as much, Lottie loved Allan Clarke, and while Nina suspected this fact, he was all unconscious of it, even as he knew of Oren's affection for Nina, who, until that sad night, little dreamed that he regarded her as other than a friend.

Preble hastened preparations so that ere the first sounds of their friends' approach broke the air, all was in readiness. The servants had received their instructions and the plantation left to their care, under control of a faithful black who had long acted as overseer.

Mr. Preble mounted his favorite horse that, by dint of unceasing watchfulness and adroit hiding, had escaped the clutches of both Cowboy and Skinner; a generous but steady animal that, like its master, was beginning to feel the weight of years. A small package of valuables and precious mementoes of those long since dead and gone, formed all the baggage the fugitives intended taking with them, excepting a quantity of provisions for the journey.

It was a sad and silent greeting between the friends when the little cavalcade came up. Nina and Lottie, clasped in each other's arms, sunk back upon the cushions, weeping softly in unison. Then the word was given, and the party once more set forth upon their journey, little dreaming of the dangers and privations that lay before them.

Could they have seen the future unrolled before their gaze, how different would have been their action! In fleeing from one danger, they were running headlong upon a still more terrible one!

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHEROKEE CHIEF.

"WHERE do you think we had best halt for noon, Steve?" inquired Captain Clarke of Little Thunderbolt, who had fallen back to the officer's side.

"Jest what I was a'ter, Cap'n Al. The critters need rest an' a snack o' grass, an' I reckon we men critters wouldn't go back on a bite o' grub, bein' as some o' us—me for one—hain't ett nothin' sence yest'day noon. Thar's as good a spot, only a little ways ahead, as we kin find in a day's lookin'. Reckon we'd better stop thar."

"Very well; do as you think best."

In a few minutes more an interesting scene formed itself by the roadside, beneath a group of trees that surrounded a spring of cold, sparkling water. The presence of women, with the rather cumbersome carriage, lent to it a new feature.

Little Thunderbolt, knowing that they were in a section of the country traversed at will by small parties of both sides, together with those from more than one Indian tribe, set out to make a circuit of the place, to guard against surprise. Though, during the day, he had met with no recent signs telling of others being in the vicinity, Steve omitted none of his usual caution on that score.

Allan Clarke left the care of the escort to Preble, and dismounting, assisted Nina and Lottie to alight from the car-

riage, leading them to a mossy seat beneath the shadow of the trees, where the flowing spring added to refreshing coolness.

"This looks like a veritable fairy grotto, with the gray, moss-covered rocks rising up behind us, the spring in front, and the trees overhanging all," cried Lottie, in childish delight, clapping her hands and looking archly up into the soldier's face.

Allan smiled, his hard-set features perceptibly relaxing as he looked down upon the maiden. Almost for the first time he began to notice how lovely and winning this child was, especially as Lottie drooped her eyes before his fixed gaze, her cheek softly suffused.

The rangers dismounted, loosening the girths and allowing their horses to drink, not caring to unsaddle until hearing the report of their scout. That was not long in coming. Little Thunderbolt soon returned, saying that he had found no traces worthy of notice, and then the rangers encamped in earnest.

Their jaded animals were now busily cropping the short, rich grass or young leaves of the undergrowth, while each ranger produced such remnants of his eatables as had not been devoured by snatches during the past night. Little Thunderbolt, by request of Clarke, built a small fire, over which he was now bending, steeping a little coffee in an old and battered canteen, that had plainly seen its share of service.

Nina, despite the grief that deadened all desire for food, forced herself to partake of the viands, though sparingly. Lottie entered into the spirit of the scene, gay and laughing, little dreaming how soon grief the most intense would be her portion. Even Clarke was forced to smile at some of her sallies, so full of innocent mirth and pleasure.

But even then the shadow of death was gradually creeping over them, and the blow was to fall, sure and deadly, only too soon.

The rangers had finished their repast, and now, lolling at their ease upon the green sward, with pipe in mouth, were placidly enjoying the fumes of the narcotic weed. Their horses had separated and wandered to some little distance, but

this gave their masters no uneasiness. A single call would bring the well-trained animals back again, whenever needed.

Little Thunderbolt alone had an inkling of the impending peril before the blow fell, but too late to guard against it. Lying upon the ground, his keen ear caught a suspicious sound, and dropping his pipe, he sprung to his feet with a cry of warning.

That action probably preserved his life, for scarcely had he left the mossy couch, than a rattling volley of firearms broke the stillness, and full one-half the rangers lay struggling in the agonies of death. The ground where Little Thunderbolt had lain was torn by two bullets, that, only for his sudden movement, must have pierced his person.

Naturally the first thought of the survivors, as they sprung to their arms, was that the Cowboys had gained force sufficient to measure strength with them, but this surmise was speedily dispelled. High above the echoes of the rifle-shots rung out a shrill, piercing yell, prolonged and vibrating—the war-whoop of the Cherokees.

And then a score or more of dusky, paint-bedaubed warriors broke cover and charged with headlong fury upon their prey.

Nina, Lottie, Allan and Oren, together with Mr. Preble, had been sitting in a group beside the spring, and were uninjured. Not a bullet had been discharged in that direction, for some reason as yet unknown.

The men sprung erect, grasping their weapons, and stood in defense of the two helpless maidens, Clarke's strong voice calling upon his men to rally around him. But this was now beyond their power.

The charging red-skins had sprung between, thus separating the two parties beyond the possibility of uniting. And then ensued a brief but terribly desperate *melee*.

Like true soldiers the rangers had kept their weapons close at hand, and at the first alarm clutched them with the grip of desperation. If die they must, it would be in harness, making their mark upon the bloodthirsty foe.

"Gi' them the best you know how, boys!" shouted Little Thunderbolt as his rifle spoke—not in vain, for one of the leading red-skins sprung high into the air, uttering his thrill-

ing death-shriek as he fell quivering to the ground. "Go under fightin', sence go it is!"

Right nobly was he seconded, and at every rifle-crack a red-skin sunk to rise no more. But only four of the rangers survived that first volley; the others had died as they lay, peacefully smoking in fancied security. Brave though they undeniably were, what could those four avail against the force that now assailed them?

Rendered doubly valiant by a knowledge of their own superiority in numbers, the Indians rushed in a body upon the little handful of rangers. Rifles were cast aside, and sabers crossed scalping-knives and tomahawks! Blood flowed freely, but the struggle was brief.

With scarcely time to deal a second blow, the devoted rangers went down before the desperate onslaught, and to fall then, meant death.

Little Thunderbolt staggered beneath the rush of two brawny savages, and fell to one knee, even as his stout knife found its way to the heart of the foremost. The dead body fell upon him, adding its weight to the efforts of the other red-skin, and the scout sunk slowly backward.

A strong hand clutched his throat with crushing force, and as the devilish eyes gleamed full into his own, a blood dripping hatchet was upraised for the death-blow. Even as his senses reeled beneath that horrible pressure, Little Thunderbolt fancied he beheld a sudden change sweep athwart the dusky countenance; but then the tomahawk fell with crushing force, and his muscles relaxing, the scout's form grew limp and nerveless.

For a moment the attention of the enemy was almost entirely turned toward the soldiers, and by this Captain Clarke was given time to change his position for one more favorable for defense. He half dragged the two girls back to the rocks already alluded to, and hurriedly directed them to lie flat behind several small bowlders that lay close to the base.

He, Oren and Mr. Preble, were armed with swords and pistols, and counted on making quite a defense, unless picked off from a safe distance with firearms. In this momentary delay, he could see how adroitly the attack had been planned and carried into execution.

One portion of the savages had circled round and gained a position from whence, at the first signal, they could spring between the horses and their masters, thus cutting off all hopes of escape by flight. On one side of the halting-place were the rocks; from the other there had come the attack. Nothing remained for the surprised party, but to die fighting.

Clarke had barely time for a single glance, that took in the situation as detailed here, when the last one of the devoted rangers went down. Then he saw that their time had come, and with hard-set lips he nerved himself for the struggle.

There was little delay. A huge savage—from his actions doubtless the leader of the band—pealed forth his war-cry, and sprung forward, closely followed by his braves.

Then the pistols of the assaulted whites spoke. The leading Indian staggered slightly, while two braves at his side fell in quivering heaps. Then came the shock.

A brief flashing of steel, and it was over. The three whites now were down; two of them bound prisoners, the third with cloven skull. Mr. Preble was slain outright, before the chief could avert the hatchet, as he assuredly endeavored to do.

Lottie sprung forward and then sunk upon the still quivering form of her parent, shrieking aloud in the agony of her spirit. The iron had entered *her* heart now, as but a few hours before, it had stricken her friends.

Nina lay in a deathlike swoon. She had seen her brother crushed to the ground by the giant's power, and believing him killed, her heart gave way beneath this fresh blow.

The chieftain—for such he indeed was—muttered a few hasty directions to his braves, and several of them immediately darted away into the woods, while others proceeded to more effectually bind their prisoners, not even excepting Nina and Lottie. Still others set about capturing the snorting horses, that, well trained, had not abandoned the spot where their masters had left them.

The chieftain coolly scraped the clotted blood from his side and with a finger traced the course taken by the pistol bullet. When satisfied that it had struck a rib, then glancing

aside, passed clear through beneath his arm, he grunted as if in derision, and chewing up a mouthful of leaves, he pressed a small pellet tightly into either aperture, thus effectually checking the flow of blood. This accomplished to his satisfaction, he turned and strode over to where Little Thunderbolt lay, bound and bleeding.

Bending low down, the savage peered long and seriously into the blood-stained face. Then producing a small horn flask from the pouch at his side, he poured a quantity of the dark-colored fluid it contained into the hollow of his palm, with it rudely scrubbing the scout's face.

A dubious grunt broke from his thin lips, and a peculiar light filled the large black eyes, but whether of pleasure or the contrary, could not be told from his features. With more of the same liquor—the smell of which proclaimed it strong brandy—he thoroughly bathed the wound made by his own tomahawk.

The scout's cheek flushed and his frame quivered sharply. The liquor caused an intense burning in the wound, and acted almost miraculously in restoring Little Thunderbolt to consciousness.

The giant chieftain arose and stood erect, with arms folded across his deep, brawny chest, his massive features sternly grave in their repose. But for the glittering eyes, he might have been taken for some sculptor's masterpiece.

Little Thunderbolt gave vent to a half-gasp, half-groan, and opened his eyes. The movement of his muscles showed that he was trying to raise a hand to his wounded head, and the chief smiled grimly as he noted the sudden change that came over the scout's features as he realized that his limbs were beyond his control.

Steve Larrabee then raised his eyes, as recollection flashed upon his mind, and met the steady gaze that was riveted upon him. A gradual change crept over his face as he looked, and again the savage smiled.

"Malatchie—the war-chief of the Cherokees!"

These words fell from Little Thunderbolt's lips almost unconsciously, in the Cherokee dialect, with a purity of accent that showed him to be a master of the language. The savage, in a full, deep tone, replied:

"Yes, it is I—Malatchie, the war-chief of the Cherokee nation. Samah-echotee has a good memory in some things. Were it better in other things, his life might be longer."

"Malatchie has changed since I knew him," coolly retorted Little Thunderbolt. "*Then* he would have scorned to threaten a bound captive. But *I* am not changed. You have seen me with arms in my hands, striking the enemy. Did I try to hide from death then? No—you can not say that. Nor do I now. You have the power to do as you will. But why did you not strike harder? Has your arm grown so weak that you can not kill a man?"

The chief for reply stretched forth his right arm, powerful as a young oak, the muscles writhing and crawling like ropes of twisted snakes. A grim smile upon his face told that he was not greatly offended by Little Thunderbolt's taunts.

"As I struck, the light shone on your face. I saw that it was that of one who once called the Cherokees his friends and his people. That made me turn my wrist and strike with the side, instead of the edge of my tomahawk. Only for that, you would have been like those yonder—*dead!*"

Little Thunderbolt shuddered at these words; not for himself, though. He remembered Nina and Lottie, and dreaded lest they also should have been slain. The Cherokee rightly interpreted his look, and replied:

"The white squaws are safe. Malatchie does not war with women. He leaves their scalps for the young braves new to the war-path, who have not yet learned how to strike a man, and those who can not yet wear the eagle-feather."

"I am glad of that, chief, for they are friends of mine, and in a manner under my care. But now, speak plain. Why have you spared my life when it lay at your mercy, and yet bound me?"

"Good! we will *both* speak plain, but you must begin. Tell me first—have you forgotten Hiwassee?"

"No, I have not forgotten her," slowly replied Little Thunderbolt, his brows contracting.

"Then does the daughter of a chief lie? She says that Samah-echotee has forgotten her—that he has forgotten his little boy brave, else why has she not seen the light of his face for two long summers and two long winters?"

"Malatchie, listen. You are a man and a warrior. I am another. While upon the trail of an enemy, I can act the snake, and sting him to death from the grass, but my tongue is never crooked to a friend. I will tell you the truth.

"When I was a young brave, I had a white squaw, and two papposes. The Stonos killed them all. They were then at war with your nation, and you were friends with my people. I came to you and offered to help fight the Stonos. We did fight them, for many a long day. Did you take any more Stonos' scalps than I—did any of your braves? No. You said then that you was proud of me, and wished to adopt me as your son. Are my words on the trail of truth?"

Malatchie nodded and Little Thunderbolt resumed :

"I was willing. I did not care then for any thing but revenge. I was hungry for the heart's blood of the coward Stonos. I said yes, and then you adopted me as your son. That same night you sent your daughter Hiwassee, the Oriole, to my lodge, saying that she must keep it in order and cook my meat and mend my weapons. This you did.

"Did I ask her to come? Did I tell you that my heart was sick for her? No, you know that I did not. Nor did I tell her that I wished her for my squaw. But you urged her upon me, and when I got tired of saying no, I said very well; if I can not give her my heart, I will give her plenty of Stonos' scalps that she may dress gayer, paint her face more brightly and dance longer than any of her sisters.

"For a hundred moons and more, I was your friend and ally. I fought for you, and gave into your hands all the riches that I won from the enemy, because, I said, I am an avenger of blood, and I only want good weapons and two or three strong horses that I may win plenty of scalps.

"But then your people and my people went to war with each other. I had painted my skin red, but beneath that my heart was still white. I only acted as you would have done—or any man would have done whose heart was not a lump of mud. I returned to my people and fought against their enemies.

"This is what I have done. If your heart grows hot and angry at that, let it be so. I do not care. I do not fear you. I do not fear death now, more than I did when we fought

the Stonos side by side, leaving all the other Cherokees far behind in the dust that the feet of the flying Stonos raised, slipping in the mud that was made by the Stonos' blood our weapons shed. I am a man and a brave, and now I am ready to die like one. I have spoken. Strike!"

The giant chief stood by in silence, his stolid features giving no evidence as to what might be his real emotions while the scout was speaking, though occasionally his head would bow in mute assent to his words. Concluding, Little Thunderbolt lowered his eyes with an air of stolid indifference, though his mind was far from being so wholly at ease as his words would seem to indicate.

"Samah-echotee speaks the truth," slowly replied the chief. "But does he know whose blood has stained his hands? At Occnoree Creek Etiwee fell. Whose hand sent my son to the spirit-land?"

"It was my hand. It was in open fight, and he died as a brave dies. He had two white scalps at his belt when my knife found his heart. He was among the enemies of my people, and I killed him as I would have slain you to-day, had my foot not slipped."

Malatchie smiled grimly. He seemed pleased by the outspoken boldness of the scout. Little Thunderbolt, knowing his nature so well, was playing the cards artfully in the game where the stakes were his own life against death.

"It is well. We all must die when our time comes. Etiwee was a brave, but who among the Cherokee nation can stand alone before the arm of Samah-echotee, when it is raised in anger?"

"Malatchie can—none other," simply added Little Thunderbolt.

"Listen. When I took up the war-path, Hiwassee spoke these words: 'If you meet Samah-echotee in battle, spare him for my sake and the sake of his little brave. Tell him that my eyes grow dim with looking for his coming—that my ears ache with listening so long for his footstep—and my heart is very sore that he stays so long away. Tell him this, from Hiwassee.' When I return, she will come to me and ask if I have met Samah-echotee. I have met him—what words shall I bear to Hiwassee?"

"These: that I have not forgotten her, nor the little brave with eyes like hers. That I often long to see them both, but that my people need me more. That while the hatchet is red and the war-trail hot with many feet passing along it, I must stay to fight for my people. But when the hatchet is hid deep down in the ground, then I will come and see my red friends. Tell Hiwassee these words from Samah-echotee."

"I will. And now Samah-echotee must no longer remain bound like a dog. There," and the giant chief bent over and severed the thongs that bound the scout. "Here are your weapons. You can go now, and tell your people that Malatchie is not a dog. He knows how to torture an enemy, but he never forgets a friend. You are my friend, because Hiwassee's heart is bound up in your life. But beware. When we meet in battle Malatchie can not see your red heart beneath a white skin. He will think you an enemy, and will kill you."

"When the war-hatchet is buried, then come to see us. Until then keep away, for the hearts of my people are very hot with hearing of the deeds done by Samah-echotee. Even Malatchie could not save you then from them. With my braves here I can do any thing. They are my body-guard. But now, remember. A chief does not speak twice," earnestly added the giant Cherokee.

"I hear your words, and will heed them, Malatchie. But before I go, I must speak with my friends."

"No—they are my captives. Let Samah-echotee be wise. He has received now more than I ought to grant. Do not make me regret that I listened to the words of Hiwassee," sternly added the chief.

"No," hastily added Little Thunderbolt, "you mistake me, Malatchie. I do not ask for their freedom. But I promise you, chief, that if you will hold them safe, for ransom, you shall receive enough for them—cloths, guns, knives and powder—to buy a hundred other captives."

"A chief does not *buy* captives, and what goods he needs he will take from his enemies with rifle in one hand and knife in the other," haughtily replied the Cherokee.

"But the squaws—you said you did not war with women," anxiously added Little Thunderbolt.

"Malatchie does not, but he will take them to his village and then decide whether they shall be slaves or his squaws, or go to the lodge of some brave. Samah-echotee is free—but it would be well that he did not make Malatchie regret having spared his life," said the chief, pointedly.

Little Thunderbolt did not speak, but as he strode toward the spot where the captives were lying, there was an expression upon his face that told his mind was fully decided upon some course. As he drew near, the eyes of Preble and Clarke were turned toward him, and their countenances betrayed the wonder they felt at seeing him free and armed.

But the suspicion that momentarily flitted upon their minds was indignantly dispelled. Though he might have made an error, or been careless in his scouting, Little Thunderbolt was no traitor.

"It's hard lines, Cap'n Al," muttered the scout, as a side-long glance showed him that the chief was beyond ear-shot, though keeping a watchful eye upon his motions. "You ain't none o' ye hurt?"

"No; but you—how is it that you are free and armed, Steve?"

Larrabee quickly explained the situation, and then seeing the chief impatiently beckoning him, he hastily added as he turned away:

"Look out for me at night ontel I come. Mind the chirp o' the tree-frog, three times close together."

"You must go now, Samah-echotee. Go—but remember that when we meet again Malatchie will strike hard."

"And you may be sure, chief, that my blows will not fall lightly as the dead leaves from the trees," pointedly replied Little Thunderbolt. "Remember my words to Hiwassee."

"Malatchie hears."

CHAPTER VIII.

A DESPERATE VENTURE.

THE wind was bowling fitfully through the tree-tops, swaying them to and fro with a lugubrious creaking, while the rain-drops fell in irregular showers to the ground beneath as the trembling forest leaves relinquished their ever increasing burden. The night was dark and dismal. Not a star was visible. The moon, though near its full, was hidden behind a dense blanket of clouds. The voices of beasts and birds were stilled; not even the chirp of an insect—those almost unceasing musicians of the forest—could be heard.

And yet there was life in the forest—human beings of two distinct colors and races. There were Indians and whites; captors and their captives.

No camp-fire marked their resting-place, and in the intense gloom, one could have passed them by within arm's length, unsuspecting their presence, in so far as the sense of sight was concerned. No wonder then, that the savages lay down to their rest without a thought of danger either to themselves or the safety of their captives. And yet they had been "marked down;" even as they slept, unfriendly eyes were upon them.

This was the second night after the day that marked the capture of our friends by the Cherokees. With a craft and cunning peculiarly his own, Little Thunderbolt had dogged their footsteps, watching for an opportunity to effect the rescue of his friends, but until now, without the shadow of a chance.

Suspecting something of the sort, Malatchie had kept watchful guard, but the scout, exerting his skill to the utmost, so blinded his trail that the chief believed he had abandoned all hopes of befriending the captives.

Little Thunderbolt had been close at hand when the Indians encamped, and by the fire they kindled to cook their meal, he marked the position well, so that now, though the rain had long since extinguished the embers, he knew every

inch of the ground. On this night he must effect the rescue, if at all, for with the morrow the Cherokee village would be reached, where he dare not venture.

With rifle strapped to his back, and ready knife, Little Thunderbolt was crawling like a snake into the camp of his foes. He felt assured that he would have to pass through blood before his object was gained, but he was prepared for it.

The one guard had tired of moving round the camp, and was now leaning against the huge bole of a tree, where a bending limb in a measure sheltered him from the driving rain. Though Little Thunderbolt was ignorant of his exact position, he was not long in finding it out.

As he pressed close to the ground, the figure of the savage was brought into relief against the less opaque forest, though even then, only for a movement of the guard as he shook the rain-drops from his person with a low muttered grunt of disgust, Little Thunderbolt might have passed him by in ignorance. After this, it was comparatively plain sailing for one so thoroughly versed in woodcraft as was Larrabee.

A dull, hollow blow—a muffled gurgle that blended with the moaning of the forest trees; that was all. Gently lowering the still quivering form to the ground, the scout uttered the peculiar chirp of the tree frog, thrice repeated; but no reply came to his anxious ear. Had Clarke forgotten his advice, and worn out by the hard day's tramp, fell asleep?

No. At the second signal, the reply came, and guided by it, Little Thunderbolt was soon beside the ranger captain, where a single false move must be fatal, for all around him lay the sleeping savages. Then it was that Larrabee gave evidence of his iron nerve and great coolness.

The keen-edged knife quickly set Clarke at liberty, who began cautiously chafing his benumbed limbs, while Steve crept on to where Preble was lying. While at work upon the thongs, one of the nearest savages gave a grunt, and rolling over, one of his hands touched the scout's body.

Fairly stilling his breath, Little Thunderbolt lay like a log, as the savage with another grunt, sat up, and peered keenly down at the form before his feet. That his suspicions were aroused by something, was plain, but the scout trusted that the darkness would foil his scrutiny.

Unfortunately, though the sense of sight was well-nigh useless, that of touch was keen as ever, and Little Thunderbolt fairly shivered as he felt the Indian's hand glide slowly over his body. Should it touch the rifle or the knife-sheath at his belt, discovery was inevitable, as the dress would tell him that it was not an Indian whom he was searching.

The catastrophe feared by Little Thunderbolt actually did occur, but he was in readiness for it. The savage uttered an astonished grunt, and then his hand clutched the scout's arm as his voice uprose in a shrill cry of warning.

With a hissing sound the heavy knife was swept around and buried hilt-deep in the red-skin's side. Then as his arm was freed, Little Thunderbolt cried:

"Up an' run fer it, boys—the game's played! Run—but keep nigh me, fer yer lives!"

Though but imperfectly comprehending what had occurred, the death-cry of the Indian, added to the words of Little Thunderbolt convinced the rangers that nothing remained for it but flight, and leaping to their feet they dashed away as rapidly as possible through the darkness, following the sound of Little Thunderbolt's footsteps.

Fortunately for the fugitives the savages were greatly confused by their sudden awaking, and for several moments were ignorant of what had occurred. But then as search was made for the captives, the body of the slain Indian was stumbled upon, and the truth realized.

By this time our friends had secured a great advantage, aided by the intense gloom, for, by the cunning of Steve, they now dropped into a walk, when their footfalls were lost in the noises of the storm. Thus, while the savages were listening for some sound to guide them, the fugitives were steadily increasing the distance between them.

"It's no use our goin' much further," muttered the scout, after a few minutes. "The imps cain't find us 'ithout we run right ag'inst them, or they take to trailin' by torchlight, which, to say nothin o' the diffikilty o' gittin' a fire in this rain, they must know 'd tell us jist whar they be. They'll try to head us off, an' then wait fer us to walk into the trap. I move we pick a good tree an' hide in it. The rain'll wash out our trail long afore day, an' then they'll soon give it up for a bad job."

"But the girls?" faltered Oren.

"What kin we do? D'ye think the reds 'll draw back jist to let us git at them, *now*? Not much. They've got thar eyes opened pritty well a'ready, an' 'll be apt to keep 'em so for one while. We cain't do nothin' to-night; lucky to 'a' did so much, *I* take it. Ef we try more, why we'll loose *all*. See?"

"But we can not abandon them!" hastily added Oren. "Think what will be their fate! I saw that big rascal—the chief, I suppose—looking at Nina as though she was a fine horse he had just stolen. I'll rescue her or die!"

"You kin do the last easy a-plenty, ef that's all. Who said we war goin' to 'bandon them? Nobody. But we cain't do nothin' *now*. We must wait an' watch fer another chainece."

"He's right, Oren. We must wait," uttered Clarke, in a gloomy tone.

During this almost whispered conversation, the three friends had not been idle, and now, assured that a safe distance had been gained, Little Thunderbolt selected a densely-limbed tree and quietly scaled it, followed by his comrades; not a moment too soon, either, for scarcely had they nestled their forms near the middle of the tree when a cat-like footfall sounded upon the wet leaves below them. A moment of breathless silence, and then they breathed freer. The savage had passed unsuspectingly by them.

In low, guarded tones the three friends discussed the situation, and Little Thunderbolt's hopeful words soon lightened the hearts of the young men. And so the dreary night crept on, without interruption from their enemies.

Just before daylight Little Thunderbolt ventured to descend from the tree, and making a wide circuit, cautiously approached the camp of the preceding night. An hour later, as the gray light of day rendered objects visible, he ventured to the foot of the tree and motioned his friends to descend.

In silence he led the way back along his trail, then pausing, raised one hand before him. A cry of surprise broke from the lips of the young rangers. The glade was empty, nor could they see any trace of the war-party, save in the trampled grass and the charred fragments of wood where their evening fire had been built.

"They're gone!"

"Yas!" bitterly hissed the scout, "they're gone—*an' so's thar trail!* The rain hes washed it out. They was at work while we was talkin', last night. With the start they've got—you kin see they must 'a' pulled camp soon a'ter we left 'em—we cain't ketch 'em afore they retch thar village, even ef they don't leave an ambush fer us on the way. An' thar—we'd better leave our skelps ahind us, afore enterin', onless we want 'em to dry in lodge smoke!"

CHAPTER IX.

HIWASSEE.

THREE weeks rolled by, not unmarked by events worthy of note, but at the end of that time the three friends seemed no nearer effecting the rescue of Nina and Lottie than at first. Of the details that filled those three weeks, little need be said at all—nothing at present.

The Cherokee village lay spread out upon a small level that formed part of the broad bottom of a valley, stretching along between high, well-wooded hills. It presented a scene of quiet peacefulness, the light, bazy smoke lazily rising from a score tiny fires, the papposes and dogs playing together in the dirt, while squaws or an occasional warrior glided from lodge to lodge, or else disappeared among the underbrush that encircled the village. To the left could be seen the horse-corral, well-stocked with fresh and vigorous animals.

At least one pair of critical eyes were looking down upon this scene from the hillside facing the west, snugly ensconced in a dense clump of bushes. 'Twould have taken a keen eye to have told whether this man was of red or white blood, for, though wearing the rude dress of a border-scout, his face was painted with divers colored pigments, and several dyed plumes were fastened in his hair.

Thus disguised, it would have been hard to recognize the scout, Little Thunderbolt.

"It's jist this," he muttered, thoughtfully. "I cain't waste no more time, an' 'tain't likely 't I'll hev a better chaine then this very night. Ef I wait any longer, Malatchie may come back, an' I'd hev hard work to fool him. The boys must be well on the road now, an' they're so blamed hot headed that ef I don't meet 'em at the spot set down, they'd jist like 's not make a break right fer the village, to lose thar last skelp. I'll do it to-night."

What Little Thunderbolt had decided upon can be briefly told. He intended entering the village with the purpose of releasing the two captives; and more—he had sanguine hopes of succeeding.

He had little fear of being detected save by two persons, and one of them, Malatchie, the giant chief, was now absent upon another expedition. The second, Hiwassee, the Oriole, he intended revealing himself to, trusting in her love for the father of her child to overpower her allegiance to her people, at least so far as to assist in the escape of the captives.

Though he had been lying in wait for two days, now, Little Thunderbolt had neither seen Hiwassee nor the prisoners. The latter, he felt assured, were still at the village, but he feared lest his Indian wife had sought some other abiding-place.

As the sun went down, Little Thunderbolt prepared for his perilous venture. He stripped off his dress and manufacturing from it a brecch-clout and leggings, he speedily painted his person in true savage style, with his feathered headdress, standing forth the model of an Indian brave, fresh from the war-path.

Steve lost no time in effecting the transformation, the long experience he had had as a Cherokee warrior now standing him in good stead. The only points that he feared discovery in were his voice and figure. The one he could change; the other was by no means a remarkable one.

All ready, Little Thunderbolt glided down the hill, and boldly advanced toward the village. He appeared to court discovery, rather than to avoid it, and as his figure was noted, he advanced directly toward the braves, and accosted them in purely accented Cherokee.

After a brief silence, having returned the salutation, one of the Indians added

"The face of my brother is strange to our eyes. And yet he must have a name, for none but a brave can show such scars as he has upon his breast."

"Crawling Snake is a brave. He used to hunt with Yellow Claw many long moons ago, but the memory of his old friend seems asleep now."

The brave called Yellow Claw started, but though he again keenly scrutinized the pretended Snake, no gleam of recognition filled his eyes.

"Is it so? Yellow Claw's eyes are growing dim. He can not recognize a friend's face."

"You have not forgotten the time when the wounded bear held you to the ground by the throat? Whose arm was it that saved your life then?"

"Fox-foot's—but he is dead long ago."

"No—for Fox-foot stands here. It was said that Samah-echotee took his scalp, but that was a lie. The great pale-face did strike Fox-foot down, but only put his mind to sleep for a time. When it awoke, Fox-foot was with the Creeks. He had been there for one whole year, with his mind in a thick cloud. But now he comes back to his true people."

Whatever doubts the Cherokees may have had, were now dispelled by the adroit lie, and they warmly welcomed the long-lost comrade. Little Thunderbolt had studied his part well. He selected one who he knew had been alone in the world, and who had fallen by his own hand, thus knowing that he stood less chance of being detected.

As he satisfied his hunger, the scout asked many questions, among others if Hiwassee was still living. He remembered that at one time Fox-foot had been an ardent suitor for the Indian maiden's hand.

"Hiwassee is still here, but she closes her heart to all words of love now, though her once brave is now an enemy to her people," gravely answered Yellow Claw.

"I wish to see her. Fox-foot does not forget. Now that he has come back to his people, with a clear mind, he needs a squaw. If not Hiwassee, then another."

"Come, then, we will go. Fox-foot can hear from the lips of Hiwassee herself."

Two minutes later, Little Thunderbolt was standing before

the woman whom he had not seen for so long, and a peculiar thrill pervaded his frame as he noticed upon a pallet the form of a slumbering boy. As Yellow Claw spoke, Hiwassee looked toward the disguised scout, and a wild light filled her eyes.

Steve saw that she had recognized him, and fearing lest an unguarded word might betray his identity, he stepped forward with outstretched hand, saying in a quick tone, while a warning glance shot from his eyes:

"Fox-foot is very glad to meet Hiwassee once more. Is he welcome?"

"Yes—he is very welcome," faltered the woman, her lithe form quivering with suppressed emotion.

"Yellow Claw is glad that Fox-foot finds another friend. He will go and bid his squaw fix a resting-place for his brother," uttered the Cherokee, as he turned and left the lodge.

"Samah-echotee!"

"My wife—but not that name. Whisper it here, and the very dead would rise up to shout for my torture. I am Fox-foot now."

The next hour was wholly devoted to each other, for Little Thunderbolt knew that midnight must pass before he could do any thing toward rescuing his friends, but then their conversation took a more practical turn. As he had hoped, Little Thunderbolt found an eager ally in Hiwassee, and together they planned the rescue.

Hiwassee was to secure horses—as she could easily do, from her father's pound—while Little Thunderbolt contrived to dispose of the guard, and bring forth the two maidens. She it was that proposed he should slay the sentries, as the surest means, and though neither spoke of it openly, it seemed settled that she was to accompany him in the flight, with her boy brave.

These points settled, Little Thunderbolt returned to the lodge of Yellow Claw, who he knew would remain up waiting for him. He had not long to wait ere all others were asleep, and then silently rolling over, he slipped beneath the skin wall and hastened at once upon his mission of blood, to the lodge Hiwassee had indicated as the one where the girls were confined.

Feeling assured that his captives would not dare attempt

an escape, the guard had stretched his brawny form before the doorway, and was now deep buried in slumber, thus rendering the scout's task all the more easy. Silently as the shadow of death Little Thunderbolt crept up beside the Cherokee, and then one swift, sure blow pierced the Indian's heart, while a stout palm smothered the faint groan as uttered.

Replacing his knife, the scout gently lifted the door-flap, and partially entered. The dim light within shone full upon the two maidens, clasped in each other's arms, alarmed by the slight noise at the entrance. Fearing lest they should cry out in their terror and thus miss all, Little Thunderbolt muttered:

"Don't be skeered, gals—it's only me—Steve Larrabee, come to take you home."

"But you look like—"

"A Injun? Jest so, but my heart is white. I had to do it to get here. But come—we mustn't fool. You're not tied, be ye?"

"No—but can we escape?"

"We kin *try*. Now foller me an' keep your faces kivered. Don't make no noise, an' don't git skeered at any thin' you may see out here."

Noiselessly, though trembling in ever fiber, the maidens stepped over the dead body and followed Little Thunderbolt. Ten minutes later found them clear of the village, and the scout hastened at once to the rendezvous, where he found the horses, four in number; but Hiwassee was not there.

"Come—you'll hev to ride bar'back, but I reckon you kin do it to save your lives. It's the best we kin do," muttered Little Thunderbolt, uneasily gazing around for the Indian woman, his eyes lighting up as he beheld her swiftly approaching, bearing upon her back the form of her boy.

"Now don't be skeered, an' hold in your critters ontel we get out o' hearin'. Then we must *ride*. Hiwassee," he added, turning to the squaw and speaking in her own tongue, "give me the boy."

"No. You may need your arms to use your weapons. See—he is not in my way, slung at my back, and I can use

there, too, if we must fight," and she significantly touched the stout bow and crowded quiver that hung at her side.

"Good! now come. We must ride fast. It'll be hard fer you gals, but remember that it's the only way by which you kin hope to see your fri'nds ag'in. Keep up a stout heart, an' trust to me to kerry you through all right."

After gently proceeding for a few hundred yards, they broke into a gallop and kept it up almost without cessation until morning, only pausing to break their trail in a small stream of water. As the sun rose above the horizon, Little Thunderbolt laughed aloud. In two hours more, he hoped to be with his friends, the rangers, and his heart was light for he believed their greatest danger was passed.

But there proved to be unlooked-for obstacles in their path, and their dawning hope was speedily changed to gloomy desperation.

CHAPTER X.

THE BLINDING SHAFT.

THE fugitives were passing through a long, narrow valley, upon one side of which the hills rose abruptly, rocky and precipitous. Beyond this valley, where the hill ranges separated and gradually became broken, lay a comparatively level tract of ground, sparsely studded with bushes and small timber.

Beyond this, again, lay the spot selected by Little Thunderbolt as a rendezvous when he separated from Clarke and Preble, when they were forced to return to the army, while he kept on to the Cherokee country. Here they were to hasten with their rangers, and await his coming. If no serious accidents had occurred, Steve knew that his friends were there, long before this.

As he neared the mouth of the valley, a cry broke from his lips and a light flashed athwart his face. Both the cry and the look were of mingled surprise and pleasure.

Before him he caught a glimpse of what seemed a camp

of white men, the light smoke still curling upward from the dying embers, men and horses standing around or else in rapid motion. That it was a camp, was plain, and equally evident was it that the party were about to make a move, for their horses were saddled and bridled, their arms adjusted in readiness for a rapid march.

"It cain't be the rangers—an' yit it *must*," muttered Little Thunderbolt, instinctively checking his horse, and shading his eyes with one hand, he keenly peered at the party.

But the sun's bright red disk shone full in his eyes, and rendered the scrutiny uncertain. Only for this fact, what followed might possibly have been avoided.

Though the fugitives were now motionless and several hundred yards from the strange party, one keen-eyed rider caught sight of their figures, rendered plainly visible against the gray rocky background, by the rising sun, and sent up a cry of surprise, directing his comrades' attention with outstretched hand.

Still Little Thunderbolt was in doubt, and with a caution that he would have scorned to show for himself, he turned and hastily whispered to his charges :

"It's mixed whether they're fr'inds or enimies, so ontel we find out, you must ride back thar a piece. You remember the cut in the rock that I showed you? Ride up to that an' then wait fer me. Don't talk—do jest as I say."

Pale and trembling between conflicting hope and fear, Nina and Lottie turned their horses' heads toward the designated spot, and trotted along the valley. Instead of imitating their example, Hiwassee unslung her bow, and with a strength of arm wonderful in a woman she passed the stout loop over its notch, the taut string twanging musically upon the morning air, as her finger tested its elasticity.

Little Thunderbolt looked around with a start, and though his countenance lighted up with pride, he seemed uneasy. The Indian woman answered his look in low but firm tones :

"Hiwassee is the daughter of a chief, and the squaw of a great brave. She knows how to fight for her little boy brave."

"It is well. But these may be friends whom we— No!

by thunder, they're them or'nary varmints, the Cowboys!" cried the scout, in his excitement relapsing into his native tongue. "Turn an' make fer the gals—it's our only show now!"

Iliwassee did not pause—though she could not comprehend his words, their meaning was written upon his countenance. Wrenching around the horse's head, she pressed her heels to its sides and dashed swiftly up the valley, soon overtaking the maidens, and leading them to the niche alluded to, she pressed them within, motioning them to dismount.

Little Thunderbolt was not far behind them. The strange horsemen had apparently satisfied themselves that the riders seen within the valley were alone, and dashing forward, thus cleared the line of the sun, giving the scout a fair view of their features and dress. As he said, they were undeniably Cowboys, and more—of the gang led by Bud Anson, in number something over a dozen.

The fugitives' position of defense was arranged with the rapidity of thought. In the rocky hillside, before spoken of, there seemed to have been a giant wedge driven, then withdrawn, leaving a cleft some twenty feet in depth, by a dozen wide at the mouth, narrowing down to less than one-third that at the end.

Into this the women had ridden, then dismounting stood behind a living breastwork of horseflesh. Hiwassee hurriedly placed her child into Nina's arms, then sprung to the side of Little Thunderbolt, who had just dismounted.

"Here—tie the balters together. Then back—the cravens can shoot straighter at a squaw than at a warrior."

"Hellow thar—you fellows," called out one of the Cowboys, their party abruptly halting as they saw how strong was the position of the fugitives. "Who be ye, anyhow?"

"Keep your distance, Hank Borāen, or you'll be likely to find out, mighty quick," cried Little Thunderbolt, leveling his long rifle over the horse's back.

A simultaneous exclamation told that the Cowboys recognized the voice of their inveterate enemy, and they shrunk back from before the threatening muzzle. But then a voice cried out in angry tones:

"Fire at the devil, then make a rush! He can only fire one shot before we can down him."

These words came clear and distinct to the scout's ears, and he smiled grimly as his fingers touched the trigger. A crack—a wild yell, and a horse dashed riderless down the valley. Hank Borden lay upon the ground, quivering in the throes of death.

This seemed the signal for the struggle. A rattling volley was discharged by the outlaws, with deadly effect, for two of the horses fell in death before the unharmed scout, completely blocking up the entrance. And yet none of the fugitives were touched.

"Now, Hiwassee—show your training!" muttered Samah-echotee, as he dropped behind the dead horses and drew his pistols.

The Cowboys with wild yells sprung forward, and as they cleared the smoke from their discharge, the feast of blood began. Two pistol-shots: one enemy falling dead, another reeling in his saddle, yelling and cursing with angry pain, his right arm dangling helplessly at his side. Three sharp *twangs* as the bow spoke; two Cowboys rolled in the dust, together with a horse whose brain was transfixed with a feathered shaft.

Little Thunderbolt sent up his wild war-cry, followed by a ringing laugh of taunting defiance as the Cowboys faltered, then quailing, fled from the harvest of death. At the first clash, full one-third of the enemy were disposed of, either dead or disabled. It was truly something to be proud of.

Without loss of time the scout recharged his weapons, and then awaited the result with more confidence than at first. For full half an hour not a sign was seen of their enemies, nor was a sound heard that would indicate the valley being tenanted by other than by themselves and the dead. This apparent security, however, did not blind Little Thunderbolt to the truth. He knew that the surviving Cowboys were even then busy hatching some scheme by which to destroy himself and gain possession of the women.

Suddenly Hiwassee uttered a faint hiss, and threw herself flat upon her back against the dead horse, her eyes being uplifted, an arrow fitted to the taut bowstring. The next in-

stant the bow was raised, bent, and the arrow discharged with the rapidity of thought.

A shrill cry of horrible agony rung out upon the air, and then a dark form toppled over and fell from the cliff, falling in a heap so close to the Indian woman that her dress was touched, then rebounding from the horse's side, lay quivering in agony, with hands tearing frantically at his head, groaning most piteously.

For a moment even Little Thunderbolt felt a thrill of pity for the groveling wretch, but then a fiendish glitter filled his eyes as a name gritted between his teeth; the name of the murderer, Bud Anson. The wounded man was indeed that worthy.

He had stolen upon the hillside to gain a position from where he could pick off the scout, but slipping, the noise betrayed him to the keen ear of Hiwassee, whose arrow-head was the first thing he saw as he peered over the edge. By swiftly dodging, Anson tried to escape the missile, but though this start kept it from piercing his brain, as it otherwise would have done, the feathered shaft passed fairly through both eyes, tearing them from their sockets, mangling the face most horribly, yet in such a manner that the wound was not necessarily mortal.

With difficulty Little Thunderbolt kept his hands from the monster's throat, but tossing Hiwassee a rope halter, he bade her bind him hand and foot. Scarcely was this accomplished than a new interruption came.

From below sounded a confused tumult; rifle-shots, the rapid thud of horses' hoofs, and the loud, clear shouts of human beings. As the scout cocked his rifle, three horsemen sprung into view before the cleft, fleeing at full speed up the valley.

A rifle-crack, a twanging bow-string with flight of feathered shaft; two more forms cumbered the earth, and of all the party, only one—and he a cripple for life—escaped from that valley of death with life.

While the smoke still oozed from his rifle-muzzle, Little Thunderbolt sent up a wild cry and sprung from his covert. He had recognized the voices of his friends and comrades, the rangers.

The joy of the meeting that ensued between brother and sister, must be left to the imagination. Printed words could give only a very faint idea of it ; still less of Little Thunderbolt's ringing laugh when the young couples got "mixed up," as he expressed it. And with blushes Nina found herself in Oren Preble's arms, while Lottie's rosy face was quite hidden in Allan's bushy beard. However, as the ladies did not seriously object, surely the reader need not.

A word from Little Thunderbolt drew Clarke aside, and then he told him of the prisoner. Instantly the light of love faded from the ranger's eyes, and that of stern vengeance took its place.

"Preble," he said, in a hard, stern voice, "you will take command and proceed down the valley, along our back trail. Leave two men with us to catch some of their horses. Give the ladies fresh mounts, and then press on at your best speed."

Hiwassee drew back and took her place beside Little Thunderbolt, nor could he prevail upon her to go with the maidens. She would not desert him even for a moment, and he soon gave over the attempt.

The rangers soon caught several horses, and then returned to their leader, who was standing over the mutilated form of him who had murdered his mother. The wretch was aware of the ranger's presence, and now pleaded cravenly for mercy, though were his life spared, he must ever wander on in blindness.

"You plead in vain, Bud Anson," coldly uttered the ranger. "You must die. I have sworn to kill you. I took a solemn oath that night as I knelt beside my mother's grave, to kill you. She would curse me if I proved false to that vow. In ten minutes more you will be dead !"

Clarke motioned to his followers, who seized upon the wretch and dragged him to the foot of a stunted tree that grew a short distance down the valley. A couple of halters were knotted together and noosed around the Cowboy's neck. Lifting Anson upon the horse, one supported him thus while the other sprung into the tree and secured the rope to a limb overhead.

Then Clarke led the horse ahead. The Cowboy slipped

from its back, and hung dangling in mid-air. Five minutes later his limbs were stilled in death.

Silently the four men, with Hiwassee, rode down the valley and out upon the plain. Shortly, Little Thunderbolt uttered a cry and pointed along the ridge. At its base, rapidly approaching, were a body of horsemen whose wild trappings proclaimed them Indians. The scout *felt* that this was the party led by Malatchie.

"It's too late to try the cleft—we must run for it," cried Clarke, as he spurred forward.

"They're better mounted 'n we air. We will hev to fight 'em sometime. Fire your rifle to let the boys know we're in trouble. They haven't got so far but they kin hear it."

Three shots were fired in quick succession, and then loading as they sped along, the fugitives began to look for a favorable position to stand at bay. Their jaded animals could not cope with those in pursuit.

"In here," yelled Steve, pointing out a dense clump of small trees, "we kin hold 'em ontel the boys come up."

The rifles of the pursuers began to crack, and even arrows were hurtling closely round the fugitives, so greatly had the Indians gained. Little Thunderbolt turned and fired; one foe the less to be met at close quarters. Then he clutched Hiwassee's bow and arrows. Against her kindred, they would be surer in his hands than in hers.

Larrabee paused at the edge of the timber, that he might have full play with his bow, unknowing that Hiwassee also had halted. Like swift-winged messengers of thought his arrows sped, bearing death upon each flinty point.

Malatchie rode straight onward, his face cold and stern, his eyes glaring with fire. He had eyes only for his traitor child. Twice the scout fired at him; two feathered shafts quivered deep in his broad chest, but with strong bow bent double, he dashed on until nearly at the clump. Then the arrow sped, like a shaft of lightning.

A cry of agony—a feeble wail—and Hiwassee fell from her horse before her husband, the reeking arrow-head protruding from the babe's back, having first transfixed its mother's heart.

A howl of furious vengeance—then the scout and the giant-

chieftain were rolling over the ground in a death-grapple, as, with loud cheers the rangers dashed madly through the thicket, led by Oren Preble.

The Cherokees at the fall of their chief, lost all courage, and breaking, fled in wild confusion.

Little Thunderbolt was lifted from the form of Malatchie, wounded and insensible, but not dead. The chief had fought his last battle. His heart was literally torn from his bosom by the maddened avenger.

Hiwassee and her babe were buried together in a hastily-formed grave; then the the rangers slowly left the tragic spot, bearing with them their wounded.

Rejoining their friends, their journey was again resumed, and in due time, with few adventures worthy of record, they reached a place of safety. But why need we linger longer? Our tale is told.

If the reader pictures a double wedding, when peace once more blessed the land, where the scout, Little Thunderbolt, was an honored guest, they have all that is necessary. Little need to say that Nina and Lottie then and there exchanged brothers, each believing she had the best of the bargain, by long odds.

THE END.

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